THE PHANTOM BLOOPER

A NOVEL OF VIETNAM

GUSTAV HASFORD

AUTHOR OF THE SHORT-TIMERS

Jerry Gustav "Goose" Hasford, USMC, in Viet Nam.

Gustav Hasford

The Phantom Blooper
by Gustav Hasford.
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Gustav Hasfords website:
http://www.gustavhasford.com

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the three million veterans of the Viet Nam war, three million loyal men and women who were betrayed by their country.

Last week members of a Marine reconnaissance patrol told of a skirmish fought with an enemy unit near the town of Phu Bai. Among the Viet Cong killed was the apparent leader of the guerrilla band—a slender young Caucasian with long brown hair.

The young white was wearing a shabby green uniform with a red sash tied across the chest.

In his hands was an AK-47, the Soviet-designed automatic weapon used by North Vietnamese regulars.

The Marines are convinced that the guerilla leader was an American, a Marine enlisted man who has been carried as missing in action since 1965.

In the past few months, they add, they have received a number of reports of Americans operating with Viet Cong units in the Phu Bai area.

--NEWSWEEK,

August 12, 1968

The Winter Soldiers

The loss of reason in war seems to me honorable, like the death of a sentry at his post.

--Leonard Andreyev

The Red Laugh

I think that history will record that this may have been one of America's finest hours.

--Richard Milhous Nixon

President of the United States

July 30, 1969

Saigon, South Vietnam

Somewhere out behind a black wall of monsoon rain and beyond our wire, the Phantom Blooper laughs.

I laugh too.

Naked except for a pearl-gray Stetson bearing a black-and-white peace button, I rise up from my bed of wet clay in the bottom of a slit trench. I climb, scuttling like a crab, to the top of a sandbagged bunker. Mud-soaked and shivering, I hunker down. I listen. Holding my breath, I listen and I wait, afraid to breathe.

I grunt. I stand up, ramrod straight. I tuck my chin into my Adam's apple and I strut to the edge of the bunker top, fists-on-hips like a Parris Island Drill Instructor.

I say, "LISTEN UP, MAGGOT!" I do an about-face. March back, about-face again.

Looking sharp, standing tall, lean and mean. "DO YOU WANT TO LIVE FOREVER?" I'm a stone-cold comedian yelling punch lines into No Man's Land. It's a midnight comedy show in the last days of Khe Sanh. I am show business for the shadow-things that crawl and slither out in the darkness beyond our wire. At any moment forty thousand heavily-armed, opium-crazed Communist individuals can come in screaming from out of the swirling fog.

I say, "DAMN THE TORPEDOES, FULL SPEED AHEAD! I HAVE NOT YET BEGUN TO

FIGHT! GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH! DON'T TREAD ON ME! SEND

MORE CONG! SEND MORE CONG!”

I wait for a reply. I listen. But nothing happens.

I pick up a broken broom handle. On one end of the broom handle is nailed a ragged pair of red silk panties—Maggie’s Drawers. I lift the broom handle and I wave the red silk panties back and forth like a battle flag.

The only sounds from beyond the wire are creaking frogs and the drumming of the monsoon rain.

I throw down Maggie’s Drawers. Then, with both hands, I give the Phantom Blooper the finger.

Midnight. The hawk is out. Ghosts are out.

The winter monsoon is blowing so hard that it is raining sideways. Meanwhile, the silence beyond the rumble of the rain is growing larger.

I sit down in an old aluminum lawn chair on top of an abandoned perimeter bunker at Khe Sanh. Cold bullets of monsoon rain wash mud from my body. With my battered pearl-gray Stetson shielding my face, I lean back and get comfortable. My right hand is touching the wet metal of a field radio under my chair.

Between my bare feet is an M-60 machine gun set up on its bipod legs. I pick up my long black killing tool. It makes me feel less naked when I hold it.

A smooth feed might save my life, so I adjust the heavy belt of clean golden bullets. Every fifth round is a red-tipped tracer. When I am one hundred percent satisfied that there are no kings in the belt, I slam the feed cover down hard and jack a round in the chamber.

Happiness is a belt-fed weapon.

The Phantom Bloopers laughs, a cold black laugh.

Maybe if I ignore the Phantom Bloopers he'll go away. If you try to debate philosophical issues with the Phantom Blooper, and lose the debate, well, he just comes right up and kills your ass. The Phantom Blooper has never talked to me and I am very disappointed. I could use the distraction of stimulating conversation. Life at Khe Sanh has always been tired but wired. Now that the siege has been lifted we need something to keep our mind occupied because boredom makes us think too much.

Meanwhile, the Phantom Blooper comes every night and the suspense is killing me.

At Khe Sanh Combat Base in Quang Tri Province in the Republic of Viet Nam, the United States Marine Corps has sometimes lacked grace under pressure, but we have stuck it out, just the same. We have burrowed into this dead hill like maggots. We have clung to the burned edge of reality and we have not let go.

This is it, the big game. The championship. The Super Bowl. This is the biggest game of your life and you're playing it for keeps. You're playing with the black ball. A sudden move at the wrong time could be your last. A slow move at the wrong time could be your last. And not moving at all could be fatal.

The grunts of Khe Sanh hate the Phantom Blooper but we need him very much. In Viet Nam you've got to hate something or you will lose your mind.

There are a lot of stories about the Phantom Blooper.

Below Phu Bai the Phantom Blooper is a black Marine Lieutenant who inspects defensive positions at bridge security compounds. The next night, they get hit.

North of Hue City the Phantom Blooper is a salt and pepper team of snuffy grunts who guide the Marine patrols into L-shaped ambushes set by the Viet Cong.

Force Recon claims a probable kill for shooting the Phantom Blooper in the Ashau Valley.

The Phantom Blooper was a round-eye, tall and white, with blond hair, wearing black pajamas and a red headband, and armed with a folding-stock AK-47 assault rifle. Recon swears that—and this is no shit—the round-eyed Victor Charlie was the honcho, the leader, of the gook patrol.

The Phantom Blooper started visiting Khe Sanh the night after the siege was lifted by Operation Pegasus. But only one Marine at Khe Sanh has ever seen the Phantom Blooper's face.

There was no moon that night, but one of our scout snipers had the Phantom Blooper targeted in a starlight scope. As he sighted in, the scout sniper described the Phantom Blooper's face to his spotter. In midsentence the scout sniper went plain fucking crazy.

When they medevaced the scout sniper at dawn the next morning, he still had not said another word.

The Phantom Blooper has many names. The White Cong. Super-Charlie. The American VC. Moon Cusser. The Round-Eyed Victor Charlie. White Charlie. Americong. Yankee Avenger.

But whatever name we use, we all know in our hearts the true identity of the Phantom Blooper. He is the dark spirit of our collective bad consciences made real and dangerous. He once was one of us, a Marine. He knows what we think. He knows how we operate. He knows how Marines fight and what Marines fear.

The Phantom Blooper is a Marine defector who deals in payback. Slack is one word the Phantom Blooper does not understand.

Like his Viet Cong comrades, the Phantom Blooper is a hard-core night fighter. When the day turns black and the sun goes down, everything beyond our wire is overrun by the Viet Cong, one more time. Every time the sun goes down, we lose the war.

Every night, the Phantom Blooper is on deck, armed with a “blooper”—an M-79 grenade launcher. The Phantom Blooper attacks without warning from out of the darkness, the one incorruptible bearer of the one unendurable truth.

“Go home,” the Phantom Blooper says, every night. And we want to go home, we really do, but we don’t know how.

“Go home,” the Phantom Blooper says, without mercy, over and over, again and again, punctuating his sentences with explosions.

A hit from an M-79 is just the Phantom Blooper’s way of telling us that we are running out of slack.

During the past week the Phantom Blooper has wasted Lieutenant Kent Anderson, Funny Gunny Bob Bayer, and that skinny New Guy, Larry Willis. And he killed Ed Miller, Bill Eastlake, and that corpsman everybody loved, Jim Richardson. Then he killed Berny Bernston, my friend. He probably even killed Animal Mother, the meanest, hardest Marine I ever knew.

Every night the Phantom Blooper comes into our wire and talks to one grunt. There are no philosophers in a foxhole. Any dumb grunt who starts to think too much becomes dangerous, both to himself and to his unit.

While I wait for the Phantom Blooper to attack, I keep my eyes turned outboard to avoid looking at the damage we have inflicted upon ourselves. For months we have been shelled, shelled every day, shelled by the

numbers, sometimes as many as fifteen hundred incoming round per day. Rusting shrapnel lies scattered across this wire-strapped plateau like pebbles on the beach. The rinky-dinks beat on us with their hard enemy metal and we give the finger to the big guns in Laos and we say: “They can kill us, but they can’t eat us.” What bullets coming out of the dark and one hundred thousand rounds of heavy ordnance Chi-Com incoming have failed to do, we have done to ourselves. We are blowing up our bunkers. We are tearing up our wire.

Last week a secret rough rider truck convoy rolled out of Khe Sanh carrying a garrison of five thousand men eleven miles east to Landing Zone Stud, leaving behind only a few hundred Marine riflemen from Delta, Charlie, and India companies as security for the Eleventh Engineers Battalion and their heavy earth-moving equipment.

In two days the flying cranes will carry off the last piece of expensive American machinery and the last of the Marine grunts at Khe Sanh will sky out on gunships. Then, when night falls, the jungle will emerge from out of the darkness and will move like a black glacier across the red clay of No Man’s Land and will silently consume our trash-strewn fortress.

And back in the World, no one will ever know about our self-inflicted Dien Bien Phu.

Cold and wet, holding my M-60 machine gun in my lap, I wait.

At zero-three-hundred, prime time for a ground attack and our peak killing hour, the Kid From Brooklyn, our radioman, hops over the sandbagged trenchline along the perimeter and slides down into the wire while heavy monsoon rain slants down, battering him in translucent sheets.

Down in the kill zone, the Kid From Brooklyn dittybops through budding gardens of metal planted thick with deadly antipersonnel mines. Stepping cautiously through Claymores, trip flares, and tanglefoot, the Kid From Brooklyn quietly and efficiently robs dead men of their postage stamps.

Communist grunts hang in our wire all the time, little yellow mummies who have paid the price, enemy military personnel who got caught in the wire and gunned down, their moldy mustard-colored khaki shirts and shorts splotched with brown, their nostrils clogged with dried blood, bugs crawling on their teeth.

Enemy sappers crawl into our wire every night. Your basic operational model gook will take six hours to crawl six yards. Sappers cut attack lanes in the wire, tape the wire back, then smear the tape with mud. They turn our Claymores around. Sometimes a gung ho sapper will get close enough to heave a fourteen-pound satchel charge into a perimeter bunker.

Those who don't blow themselves up on an antipersonnel mine get hung up in the wire or trip a flare. Then we demonstrate leatherneck hospitality by grenading them and shooting them to death.

Incoming patrols sometimes bring in confirmed kills and throw them into the wire as war trophies.

The North Vietnamese Army likes to probe us with ground attacks. They drag their wounded off to tunnel hospitals. They bury their dead in shallow graves in mangrove swamps. Wasted gooks unlucky enough to get left behind hang in the triple strand concertina wire until maggots hollow them out from the inside and they fall apart.

Rotting corpses can get to smelling pretty bad sometimes. We really should bury them, but we don't. Nobody likes to police up dead gooks. You grab confirmed kills by the ankles or by the wrists and their arms and legs come off in your hands like sticks. If you try to pick up what's left of the torso sometimes your fingers slip into an exit wound and then you're standing there with a handful of maggots.

Besides, we enjoy throwing dead gooks into the wire. A dead gook hanging in our wire in less than mint condition is a handy audio-visual aid to keep our enemies honest. We want everybody we do business with to know who we are and what we stand for and take seriously.

Now down in the rain in the dark the Kid From Brooklyn is digging into mildewed pockets for colorful bits of gummed paper.

It all started when the Kid From Brooklyn pulled an R&R in Japan. He took the bullet train to Kyoto, scarfed up beaucoup sake and Japanese bennies, and took long hot baths with slant-eyed naked jailbait.

"I'm a salty Lance Corporal who is short, short, short," the Kid From Brooklyn said when he came back from Japan. "I'm so short, I could fall of a dime. I'm so short the gooks probably can't even see me."

In Tokyo the Kid sourvenired himself a small black stamp album. Now he's back in-country to pull his tour of duty in a world of shit. Only he's

different now. He has changed. Now the Kid From Brooklyn is a dedicated stamp collector.

Enemy postage stamps depict exciting scenes of war and politics. North Vietnamese troops shake hands with smiling Viet Cong under a Communist red star and wreath. Columns of ragged and forlorn American prisoners of war are marched off to Hanoi prison camps. A helicopter gunship with an over-sized U.S. on its side plunges to earth in flames to the cheers of an all-girl peasant militia crew behind the village anti-aircraft gun. An old papa-san walks along a paddy dike, a hoe in one hand and a rifle in the other.

I watch the Kid From Brooklyn, hunched over a suspended carcass, indulging himself in his grubby hobby. I know that it is my job to climb down there and drag his section eight ass back behind the wire where it belongs.

I know that I should do that, most ricky-tick, but I don't. I need him as bait.

"Damn," the Kid From Brooklyn says, gently shaking his leg loose from a wild strand of tanglefoot that has caught him in the ankle. He bends down to another shredded lump of shadow and frisks it for diaries, wallets, piasters, love letters, and crumbling black-and-white photographs of gook girlfriends. Everything that looks like it might have postage stamps in it gets stuffed into one of the cargo pockets on the front of his baggy green trouser legs.

In the monsoon rain the Kid is a black silhouette. His poncho is outlined by silver blips. He is a perfect target. Gook snipers in the dark can hear the rain bouncing off the Kid's poncho.

The Phantom Blooper can see the black buttplate of the Kid's M-16, slung barrel-down to keep the rain out of the bore.

I should try to save the Kid From Brooklyn's bacon, but I won't. I can't. Marines are not elite amphibious shock troops anymore. We have been demoted to expendable seafood. In Viet Nam we're only cheap live bait, impaled on an Asian hook, wiggling until we draw fire and die. Dying, that's what we're here for, our Parris Island Drill Instructors would say:

"Blood makes the grass grow."

I pick up the handset to the Kid From Brooklyn's field radio. The handset has been taped up inside a clear plastic bag. I whistle softly. I grunt. I say, "This is Green Millionaire, Green Millionaire, First Platoon Actual. I

want illumination, ladies. I want illumination and I want it immediately fucking now."

First Platoon is sleeping, totally exhausted after an eighteen-hour day of loading six-bys.

An endless convoy of trucks has been hauling off live howitzer shells, wooden pallets stacked high with cases of C-rations, mountains of plywood and building beams, and tons of sheets of perforated steel planking torn up from the airfield.

First Platoon is cutting a few well-earned zulus. Time to wake them up. Time to wake the whole base up.

The handset sizzles with static and someone says, "Rog. Pop one. Shot out." I heft my M-60 to port arms the way they do it in the movies and I squint harder and harder into an expanding darkness. But my night vision is not what it used to be. There's no movement. No muzzle flashes. No sound but the rain.

One word from me and the Phantom Blooper will be in the bottom of red-mud swimming pool shitting Pittsburgh steel. If a frog farts I will bury that frog under a black iron mountain of American bombs. And even if this dirty zero-zero weather keeps the big birds grounded I can always get arty in. One magic set of two-word six-number map coordinates spoken into my radio handset and the cannon cockers get wired and in forty seconds I can crank up more firepower than a Panzer division.

Somewhere in the rear a mortar tube fumps.

My finger squeezes up all the slack on the trigger. I take a deep breath. I've got the jungle covered. I'm looking forward to working the 60 and cutting up the black night with red lines of bullets.

Five hundred yards downrange and moon high, a mute pock. Light, vast, harsh, and white, spills out across the black sky, melts, then floats down with the rain. An illumination flare sways under a little white parachute, squeaking and dripping sparks that hiss and pop.

I hold my breath and freeze. Now is not the time to make a wrong move. The Phantom Blooper is just waiting for me to do something stupid like a New Guy.

Down in the wire, the Kid From Brooklyn stops and looks up at the light. Near Sorry Charlie, our pet skull, the Kid hunkers down, pounded by cold gusts of wind and monsoon rain.

Black laughter drifts in from No Man’s Land. The Kid turns outboard and slowly unslings his rifle. Behind his rain-fogged glasses his eyes are big in his face.

There is the sound of a metallic wine bottle popping open and there is the moment of perfect silence and then one M-79 blooper fragmentation grenade hits the Kid From Brooklyn and the Kid From Brooklyn does a very bad impression of John Kennedy campaigning in Dallas and in silent slow motion the Kid From Brooklyn’s head dissolves into a cloud of pink mist and then bam and the Kid From Brooklyn falls in pieces all over the area, blown away, killed in action and wasted, shot dead and slaughtered.

The Kid From Brooklyn’s headless body is a contorted blob of wax in the ghost light of the illumination flare. One arm gone. One arm converted to pulp. Legs bent too far and in the wrong directions. Ribs curving up incredibly white from inside a glistening black cavity which, as though on fire, is steaming.

Abruptly, illumination fades. Night falls on my position. A shadow walks across my field of fire.

I cling to the cold metal of my machine gun, my mouth dry, teeth gritted, finger aching, hands white, knuckles bleeding where I’ve bitten them, sweat stinging my eyes, stomach pumping in and out, and I’m shaking.

The Phantom Blooper knows where I am now. He knows where I live. Out there beyond the wire in that deep black jungle the Phantom Blooper can hear the sounding of the gong that is the beating of my heart.

I try to let go of the machine gun, but I can’t let go.

Hunkered down, I hold my breath, afraid to fire.

Beaver Cleaver, who likes to tell people who don’t know any better that he is our Platoon Sergeant, is cutting himself a big piece of slack up in his luxurious bunker. The bunker was constructed to the Beaver’s precise specifications by the Seabees in exchange for six Willy Peter bags full of marijuana. No doubt the Beaver is sitting on his rack, drinking cold beer, and watching Leave It To Beaver reruns on his battery-powered, Thai-subtitled Japanese television.

I wait until dark, pull on some rotting jungle utilities and some Ho Chi Minh sandals, and crawl out of the rat’s next of crumpled body bags and

parachute silk I’ve made for myself inside a Conex box. The time on deck is oh-dark-thirty. Time to walk lines.

I have walked lines hundreds of times at Khe Sanh. Tonight everything is new and strange. I feel like a blind man after some sadist has moved all the furniture. In the moonlight I’m falling down all over the place like some kind of fucking New Guy. The bulldozers of the Eleventh Engineers have definitely wasted my area. Even the bunkers are not where they are supposed to be. I feel lost. My hometown has been taken away, stacked, burned, or evacuated.

The Marine Corps moves in mysterious ways.

Every twenty meters I stoop down and tug at the barbed wire with det cord crimps to see if the wire has been cut. The tugging scares up bunker rats big enough to stand flat-footed and butt-fuck a six-by. I scan the tanglefoot to see if it looks tight enough to hold the weight of falling dead men. I check the position of each Claymore mine. We paint the backs of our Claymores white so we can count them in the dark and see that they are still facing outboard.

I keep one eye on the darkness out beyond the wire. While fireteams of highly motivated mosquitoes try to scarf me up as their midnight chow I wait for the shadows beyond the wire to turn into people. At night we enter that world where all men are phantoms.

There are things out there in the dark, things that move. Maybe a torn and decaying sandbag being blown around by the wind. Or a stray water buffalo. Or a patch of night thrown down by a cloud passing in front of the moon. Or maybe those black dots shimmering out there at five hundred yards are cold and hungry Viet Cong troopers silently colliding and massing for a ground attack.

Or maybe the Blooper. The Phantom Blooper could be out there, sighting me in.

Tomorrow we blow the wire. Growling green bulldozers will plow down the last of our bunkers and Khe Sanh Combat Base won't be here anymore. The Marine Corps won't be here anymore. Until then, the hills are full of gooks and Khe Sanh is their hobby. Enemy recon teams eyeball us from the ridgelines, probing for any sign of slack. They still want this fog-cursed place.

Life in the V-ring:

Inside the only guard bunker still standing in our area, our New Guy is busy choking his lizard. The New Guy's teenaged horny brain has left Khe Sanh and has gone back to the World and has wrapped itself up inside Suzie Rottencrotch's pretty pink panties. He groans, abusing government property, polishing his bayonet, just a little early-morning organ practice to cut the edge off the cold; the Marines have landed and the situation is well in hand. What is the sound of one hand clapping?

I hop down into the bunker.

A field radio buzzes. I pick up the handset while the New Guy fumbles frantically with the buttons on his fly.

Some fucking pogue lifer standing radio watch in the Sandbag City command post demands a sit-rep, then yawns out loud.

Instead of saying "all secure" in a mechanical monotone, I say with an exaggerated gook accent: "This is General Vo Nguyen Giap speaking. Situation normal, all fucked up."

The fucking pogue lifer on the radio laughs and says, "Wait one." Then he says to someone in the background, "It's Joker. He says he's a Jap." Both pogues laugh and talk about how crazy I am and then the radio voice says, "Affirm, Joker. Roger that," and I put down the handset.

The New Guy is waiting for me, standing almost at attention.

Since the Phantom Blooper started wasting the white grunts with the most T.I.--time in--all I've got left are New Guys. The replacement pipeline pulls cherries out of high school and ships them to Khe Sanh. Half of my people are salty black grunts, but Black John Wayne has ordered the bloods to stand down and to stand by for mutiny. The Grim Reaper, Major Travis, chooses to pretend the mutiny does not exist.

Meanwhile, New Guys have to be watched. Along about midnight, when the Phantom Blooper walks and talks, New Guys wet their pants. Nobody wants to die alone and in the dark.

I try to scare the living shit out of New Guys. The wrong kind of fear can kill you but the right kind of fear can keep you alive. New Guys do not see with the hard eyes of grunts. Not all grunts see those black facts that are as hard as diamonds, only the quick. The dead are kids who can't get wired to the program, and pay the price. Here it's grow up now, grow up fast, grow up overnight, or you don't grow up at all. There it is. The usual ration

of civilian bullshit is poison here. Bullets are real metal. Bullets don't give a damn that you were born stupid.

Only in Viet Nam is hypocrisy fatal.

New Guys will bore you to death if you give them half a chance. They tell you scuttlebutt.

They complain. They pop up with platitudes they've found on bubblegum cards, silly shit about the origins of the universe and the meaning of life. They tell you where they went to boot camp, about thigh school athletic awards they've won, and they show you pictures of teenaged girls they claim are their girlfriends. They tell you what they think they've learned about themselves, God, and their country, and they tell you their opinions about Viet Nam.

That's why New Guys are so dangerous. They're thinking all the time about how light refracts through water to create rainbows and why a seed grows and about how they used to cop a feel on Suzie Rottencrotch and so they don't see the trip wire. When they get killed, they have so many things on their minds that they forget to stay alive.

"What's your name there, dipshit?"

"Private Owens, sir." He steps forward. I shove him back.

"Been in-country long, hog?"

"All week, sir."

I turn away. I don't laugh. After a few cadence counts, when I trust myself, I do an about-face.

"The correct answer to that question is 'all fucking day.' And stow the Parris Island 'sir' shit, lard ass. Shut your skuzzy mouth, fat body, and listen up. I am going to give you the straight skinny, because you are the biggest shitbird on the planet. Don't even play pocket pool when you're supposed to be pulling bunker guard in my area. You will police up your act and get squared away, most ricky-tick, or you are going to have your health record turned into a fuck story. In Viet Nam nice guys do not finish at all and monsters live forever. You got to bring ass to get ass. A few weeks ago you were the hot-rod king of some hillbilly high school, stumbling around in front of all the girls and stepping on your dick, but be advised that Viet Nam will be the education you never got in school. You ain't even born yet, sweet pea. Your job is to stand around and stop the bullet that might hit someone of importance. Before the sun comes up, prive, you could be just

one more tagged and bagged pile of nonviewable remains. If you're lucky, you'll only get killed."

The New Guy looks at me as though I've slapped him, but does not reply.

I say, "We are teenaged Quasimodos for the bells of hell and we are as happy as pigs in shit because killing is our business and business is good. The Commandant of the Marine Corps has ordered you to Khe Sanh to get yourself some trigger time and pick up a few sea stories.

But you are not even here to win the D-F-M, the Dumb Fucker's Medal. The only virtue of the stupid is that they don't live long. The Lord giveth and the M-79 taketh away. There it is.

Welcome to the world of zero slack."

The New Guy swats away a whining mosquito, looks at his boots, says sweetly, hating my guts, "Aye-aye, sir."

I don't say anything. I wait. I wait until the New Guy looks up, looks at me. He snaps to attention, a ramrod up his ass, his chin tucked in. "Yes, SIR!"

I stroll down the muddy catwalk of rope-handled ammo crates. I pick up a short black cardboard cylinder from the firing parapet. I tear off black adhesive tape from around the cardboard cylinder until it breaks open. An olive-drab egg drops into my hand, hard, heavy, and cold. There is tape around the spoon; I tear it off.

I say, "I know you've seen all of John Wayne's war movies. You probably think you are in Hollywood now and that this is your audition. In the last reel of this movie I'm supposed to turn out to be a sentimental slob with a heart of gold. But you're just another fucking New Guy and you're too dumb to do anything but draw fire. You don't mean shit to me. You're just one more nameless regulation-issue goggle-eyed human fuckup. I've seen a lot of ol'

boys come and go. It's my job to keep your candy ass serviceable. I'm the most squared-away buck private in this green machine lash-up, and I will do my job."

I hold down the spoon on the grenade with a thumb and I hook my other thumb into the pull ring. I jerk out the cotter pin. I put the pull ring into my pocket.

The New Guy is staring at the grenade. He thinks now that maybe I'm a little dien cai dau--

"crazy." He tires to move away but I punch him in the chest with the frag and I say, "Take it, New Guy, or I will get crazy on you. Do it now."

Awkward, stiff, and scared shitless, the New Guy touches the grenade with his fingertips to see if it's hot. His trembling fingers get a grip on the spoon. I let him breathe his bad breathe into my face until I'm sure he's got control of the spoon, then I let go.

The New Guys holds the grenade out at arm's length, as though that will help if it goes off.

He can't take his eyes off of it.

I say, "Now, if you need gear, do not go to supply. They sell all of the good stuff on the black market. Supply will not issue you any gear, but they might sell you some. No, what you do is you wait until you hear an inbound medevac chopper or until somebody says that some dumb grunt has been hit by incoming. They you double-time over to Charlie Med. Outside of Charlie Med there will be a pile of gear the corpsmen will have stripped off of the dying grunt. While the doctors cut the guy up, you steal his gear.

"After that, the first thing you need to know is to always tap a fresh magazine of bullets on your helmet in case it's been in your bandolier long enough to freeze up due to spring fatigue.

The second thing you need to know is this: don't even piss in my bunker. You need to pee, you just tie it in a knot. And the last piece of skinny I've got for you, New Guy, is this: don't ever put a Band-Aid on a sucking chest wound."

The New Guy nods, tries to talk, tries to pull some air down and cough some words up at the same time. "The pin..." He swallows. "Do you want me to be killed?"

I turn to go. I shrug. "Somebody's got to get killed. It might as well be you. I'm not training you to keep you from getting killed. I'm training you so you don't get me killed."

I look down at the wristwatch hanging from the buttonhole of the breast pocket of my utility jacket. I say to the New Guy, "I will inspect this position again in two hours, you gutless little pissant. You will not even fall asleep. When I give you the word you will return my personal hand grenade in a serviceable condition. You will not even allow my personal hand

grenade to blow itself up and hurt itself. You will not even mess up my favorite bunker with horrible remains of your disgusting fat body."

The New Guy swallows, nods. "Aye-aye, sir." He's really scared shitless now. He's scared of me, scared of the frag, scared of everything and everybody on the planet.

I say, "When the Phantom Blooper comes, do not work the 60. Pop a frag. Or call in for artillery support. Pop frags all over the area if you want to, many, many of them. When you're standing lines you frag first and forget about asking the questions. Keep your shit wired tight at all times. But do not work the 60. The tracers in the 60 will give away your position."

But the New Guy is not listening. He's distracted.

Down in the wire a squad of Marines is coming in off a night ambush. Somebody pops a star cluster flare and five glowing green balls of beautiful fireworks swoosh up and sparkle down.

A bone-weary squad leader issues a military order: "Hippity hop, mob stop."

I say, "What is your major malfunction, numbnuts? How long will it take me to forget your name?" Without warning I get a firm grip on the New Guy's Adam's apple and I slam him hard into the bunker wall. Most of the air is knocked out of him. I choke out what's left.

I get right up into the New Guy's face. "I can't hear you, you spineless piece of lowlife. Are you going to cry? Go ahead--squirt me a few. You better sound off like you got a pair, sweetheart, or I will personally unscrew your head and shit in your shoulders!"

His face red, Private Owens tries to speak. His eyes are bulging out and he's crying. He can't breathe. His eyes lock on me, the eyes of a rat in a trap. I stand by to make my hat most ricky-tick. The New Guy looks like he's just about ready to faint and drop the grenade.

"AYE-AYE, SIR!" he screams, crazy, desperate. He shoves me back. He makes his free hand into a fist and hits me in the face. His eyes are turning to the dark side now; he sees himself in my face as though in a mirror. He hits me again, harder. We're relating now, we're communicating. Violence: the international language. The New Guy glares at me with pure uncut hatred in his puffy red eyes.

The New Guy shoves me back again, sneering at me now, daring me to stop him, inviting me to get in his way, meaning it, not afraid now, not

caring what I might do, a little crazy now, nothing to lose now, nothing standing between him and that one short step into the Beyond.

Nothing but me.

"I'll kill you," he says, and cocks his arm, threatening me with the frag. "I'll kill you," he says, and I believe him, because, finally, the New Guy has become a very dangerous person.

I can't keep the smile off my face, but I dot try to make it look like contempt. "Carry on, Private Owens," I say, and I let him go.

I do an abrupt about-face and dittybop down the catwalk. I pause. I dig the pull ring from the hand grenade out of my pocket. I flip the pull ring across the bunker to Private Owens, who actually catches it.

"Don't play with it anymore tonight, Private Owens."

Private Owens nods, looking glum and totally confused. He brings the hand grenade up to the tip of his nose and picks at the firing mechanism with a fingernail, then pokes around with the cotter pin on the pull ring, trying to reinsert it into the grenade.

"Carry on," I say, aiming a forefinger between his eyes. "After I'm gone."

Private Owens nods, stands still, and waits, a human Marine monument to an ignorance hard as iron.

When you're a New Guy, and the first shell falls, you're a man, but confused. When the second shell falls, you're still a man, although you're probably soiling your underwear. By the time the third shell falls, fear, like a big black rat, has gnawed clean through your nerves.

When the third shell falls, you, the New Guy, like a mindless, terrified rodent, are digging a hole to hide in.

You've got to keep New Guys alive until they realize that we're not going to win this war, which usually takes about a week.

I've walked twenty meters away from the guard bunker when there's the hard thump of an explosion to my rear.

For one second I think: tough titty, grease one New Guy.

But Private Owens has not blown himself up with personal hand grenade.

Another shell booms in. Then another.

Incoming.

"INCOMING! INCOMING!" Teenaged voices echo the word.

Incoming means jagged steel screaming through the air, sizzling hot and invisible, hissing and smoking and searching for your face.

An old deuce-and-a-half horn nailed to a dead tree bleats; too late. Somebody didn't get the word. Most days we get ten or twelve seconds' warning in which to cover our asses. Marine forward observers on Hill 881 South see muzzle flashes on Co Roc ridge across the Laotian border and radio in, "Arty, arty, Co Roc."

BOOM.

I double-time in the mud, mumbling an obscene grunt bunker-prayer. I'm just about read to bend over and kiss my ass goodbye when I stumble into a flagpole bearing a tattered American flag and a crudely stenciled sing: ALAMO HILTON.

I dive in headfirst. Someone says, "Hey, you fucking asshole, get your goddamn fucking elbows out of my fucking balls."

The air inside the bunker is hot and thick. The bunker stinks of sweat, piss, shit, rotting feet, wet canvas, vomit, beer, C-ration farts, mosquito repellent, and mildewed skivvies. But then since I became a night person I've had the body odor of a ghoul, so I can't complain.

It's black in the bunker; you can't see your hand in front of your face.

Cooing over Armed Forces Radio, the sweetest little blond wet dream this side of heaven:

"Hi, love. This is Chris Noel. Welcome to a date with Chris. Now here's a song for First Platoon, Deadly Delta, at Khe Sanh, County Joe and the Fish with 'I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag.'"

The men in the bunker listen to the song in silence until the chorus, then every man abruptly bursts out singing as hard and as loud as he possibly can: And it's one-two-three what are we fighting for?

Don't ask me--I don't give a damn

The next stop is Viet Nam

And it's five-six-seven open up the pearly gates

Well, there ain't no use to wonder why

Whoopee, we're all gonna die.

After the song ends someone turns down the radio and someone says, "We need us a jarhead song. The Green Beanies have got their own song, and they ain't shit. What we need is a Marine song. A song for grunts."

BOOM. "Fuck this incoming," someone says, then laughs.

"Yeah. Yeah. That could be the title!"

A chorus of "fucking As" and everybody laughs.

Outside, a hard rain falling, enemy shells, 147 pounds each, heavier than the men who are firing them. First, a long, long whistle, then the rush of air of a falling freight car, then boom.

The deck shivers, and hot shrapnel sings its mean little song. Most of the shells just bang in and miss. They move the garbage around a little bit and scare everybody and then they turn into paper and somebody puts them into history books.

Listening is a waste of time because you never near the shell that hits you; it just hits you and you're gone.

Anyway, we're thinking, it's a known fact that incoming artillery shells always kill somebody else. Every single time we've been shelled, the shells have killed somebody else. Not once have the shells killed us, not even one time. That's a proven scientific fact. No shit.

So we ignore the incoming, without forgetting that while our bunkers can take a hit from a gook mortar, a direct hit from one of those high-velocity 152 mike-mike flying demolition balls will knock this bunker right off of the face of the earth. Even the dud shells go four feet into the ground.

What's left of First Platoon's black street bloods hunker down in total darkness smoking Black Elephant marijuana and giggling like schoolgirls and telling sea stories. I smoke my share of the dope and somebody else's share.

"Listen up," I say, doing my famous impression of the voice of John Wayne. "This is no shit, pilgrim. The true story of the War for Southern Independence. So your Yankee auto workers up in Motor City were all heads, right? And all of the good marijuana plantations were in the Deep South."

My invisible audience of black Marines groans, then cheers.

"In Detroit, grass was five hundred dollars a lid. In Atlanta, it was free. To the northern heads, this was incredible."

Someone says, "Hey, man, keep on the grass!" and the bloods laugh.

A shell comes in squealing, squealing like a stuck pig, a fat iron Communist pig bred in Moscow to have a thirty-second hard-on for Americans. But instead of boom there's only a silly whomp as the shell

detonates in a mud hole. Concussion shakes the bunker. Sand falls from the ceiling of perforated steel planking, logs, and sandbags.

Someone coughs, then chokes. I shake sand out of my hair and scrape damp sand from the back of my neck. Someone pounds the choker on the back. The choker hawks up a loogie and spits it onto the back of my hand. "Shit," I say, as I wipe off the back of my hand on somebody else's leg.

John Wayne continues: "So this guy named Lincoln came onto The Tonight Show, see? He was a basketball hero and a celebrity rail-splitter who got--no, listen--who got himself elected President, now, he was elected President because his face--no, really, this is no shit--because his face--yes, his face--accidentally got engraved on all of the fucking pennies!"

The bloods laugh, howl, and beat on sandbags with fists and rifle butts. They tell me how full of shit I am and they threaten to pee.

Whomp. Shrapnel bites into oil drums, sandbags, and wood.

John Wayne says, "Jefferson Davis got elected President of the Confederate States of America on a platform of a chicken in every pot and pot in every chicken.

"So the DamYankees loaded up with rolling papers and pistols--yeah, yeah, that's right--their pistols were all really big--and they put these really big dope fuses into their cannons and then they all rode on steamboats down to New Orleans, Louisiana.

"Down in the French Quarter they scored about one ton of Acapulco Gold from some black jazz musicians they met in a strip joint on Bourbon Street."

We toke in silence but with enthusiasm.

Finally, someone says, "Okay, man, so what happened then?"

John Wayne says, "What happened then? Well, let's see...The Civil War soldiers all got hammered out of their minds together and then the war was over and everybody got laid. Of course, the DamYankees lied about it and told Walter Cronkite that they won and so that's what they put on TV."

The black grunts laugh and laugh.

Someone says, "Hey, Joker, do your Charlie Chaplin! Yeah, that's it! Do Charlie Chaplin in the dark!"

Someone says, "Charlie got a bloop gun!"

Black John Wayne says, "Joker, m'man, you are a humorous person. So tell us the rest of it, man. What happens next?"

"How the fuck do I know?" I say in my own voice. "I'm just making up this bullshit as I go along."

Black John Wayne laughs and Godzilla's paw pounds me on the back in the dark. Black John Wayne says to someone, "Shoot me the handset, blood." Then he talks in a very low voice, calling in his November Lima, his night location, which is at an ambush site outside the wire, and his Papa Lima, his present location, which is about three hundred yards east of Hill 881

North. He gives the grid coordinates and a sit-rep of all secure, grunts, and drops the handset.

I say, "Pulling another hairy mission, J.W.?"

A booming laugh, then a pause. "Yeah, man. Life is real hard out here in the bad bush. We pulling a definite number-ten hump. Transmission ends." Another laugh. "I wish I was president and Nixon was a grunt."

"You have got to belay all this 'Black Confederacy' bullshit, J.W."

Pause. "Sergeant Joker, you got a personal problem? Hey, bro, what evil lurks in the hearts of men, I do know. You got a problem, m'man, run it by me. I will reach out and make it good, because Black John Wayne is a problem solver."

"LPs, J.W. I need LPs."

"Hey, man, don't even talk to Black John Wayne about no Mickey Mouse listening posts and none of that other gung ho Audie Murphy whitebread shit. I no longer choose to participate in the mindset of morally disoriented bloodthirsty chucks. Black John Wayne has smoked more than his share of little gold niggers, from Con Thien to the Rockpile and down in the Arizona Territory. But no longer do I desire to relate to this oppressive and corrupt environment."

The black Marines cheer while Black John Wayne continues, talking with the tone of a backwoods preacher delivering a fiery sermon: "Black Confederacy secedes from your Viet Nam death trip."

With one voice the men in the bunker say, "Amen."

Black John Wayne says, "Guilty rich kids marching for peace just wasting they shoe leather.

Dumb grunts is stopping this evil war, a--men, and they won't never know the truth back in the World, the truth that the grunts have the power,

the real power, because the fucking pogue lifers and the corrupt politicians are not even going to admit the facts, not even."

Black John Wayne waits for the "Right ons" to die down, then continues. "This heavily armed and highly motivated reinforced rifle squad of homeboys will go back to the block.

We be tin-starred marshals of revolutionary justice. With my squad back in the World I could take over half of Brooklyn. Peace through superior firepower! Firepower to the people!

History is not over yet! History collects its debts!"

The squad cheers so loud and claps so hard that for a few moments even the banging of the shells outside is drowned out.

I grunt. I say, "We got to have LPs. We're light. A ground attack could walk right over the wire. The gooks know that something is going down and until we sky out we're wide open to get hit. I got no time for your bullshit political rap, J.W. I'm not interested in politics."

Black John Wayne says, "Joker, m'man, you may not be interested in politics, but politics is interested in you. Or maybe you be here as a tourist? Politics is not hard to understand.

Politics is somebody's nightstick upside your head. Hey, man, can you dig my progressive talk? Don't you know why the Phantom Blooper is here, man? The Phantom Blooper has come to take your white ass to school. Bone Six, that bad ol' Blooper, he everywhere, man.

He maybe sitting in this bunker with us right now."

I say, "J.W., I'm sick of listening to your race-war movie."

Black John Wayne says, "Why, you silly Alabama white trash, you are misinformed. The white man is not the enemy. One day, by and by, you will see the revolt of the Uncle Tom white people. That's some cold shit, man, but there it is.

"The devil is a green man, the money man. They tell us we are small. But we not small, we tall, we be kings, and the President is not God in a black limousine. They calling you 'nigger'

too, Joker. You just ain't got the word."

I say, "Sounds like a giant liquor-store robbery to me, J.W. Rich people got all the money.

You take the money away from them. Then you got the money."

"We won't fight for money," says Black John Wayne, "we will fight to say that Uncle Sam ain't no damned uncle of mine. Uncle Sam he say to these Vietnams, you can live, but you can't be men. Dance and sing for us and be little yellow niggers, Mr. VCs, and we might be big-hearted and let you live. Uncle Sam say, 'Stick 'em up, your balls or your life.'"

Black John Wayne's voice booms inside the bunker: "Whitebread America find it impossible to relate to why these Vietnams stand up and fight. The green man don't care about nothing that much no more, he fat, he forgot what it like to fight. They traded in they balls for a split-level house, a nigger maid, and a lifetime supply of TV dinners, a long time ago. Dignity, m'man, that's what the Vietnams want, and that's why my homeboys want. I'm a black man with a brain, a black brain, and I am a very dangerous person. We are men! We want our dignity! If they fuck with us, they are going to die. Nobody ever calls me nigger when I'm carrying my grenade launcher."

"RIGHT ON!" someone says, and the bunker shakes with shouts of "RIGHT ON! RIGHT

ON! RIGHT ON!" until everybody is hoarse.

I say, "I want LPs. Get me some warm bodies that can move like they got a purpose, J.W.

All I got standing lines are New Guys. Name your price. Six cases of beer, next resupply."

A shell hits very close to the bunker. Whomp. The bunker trembles.

"What's wrong with these zips?" someone says. "Can't they take a joke?"

Black John Wayne laughs. "Mr. Charles ain't even about to waste a pretty homeboy like me."

He laughs again, enjoying himself. "Joker, you are a real bone-headed box of rocks. I ever tell you that?"

I say, "J.W., I am not the Virgin Mary and you are not the baby Jesus. I want three LPs out, most ricky-tick. That's immediately fucking now. Do it now, J.W. or you will wake up with a piece of the world nailed to the side of your head."

Before Black John Wayne can reply, we hear Beaver Cleaver's loud mouth at the bunker entrance. Beaver Cleaver never stops talking; sweet-talking everybody on the planet is Beaver Cleaver's hobby.

Everyone relaxes. If Beaver Cleaver has left his personal bunker it means that he has received an all-clear from Hill 881 South and the incoming is over. For now.

"Is Black John Wayne here?" says the Beaver's voice in the dark.

Black John Wayne says, "Get out of my face, punk."

"Sergeant, I've got orders from the X.O. I'd like to have a word with you in private if I could."

"Negative."

"Sergeant, it was the Major's understanding that you and your squad were out on a night ambush."

Black John Wayne says, "You been misinformed."

The squad laughs.

"Sorry?" says the Beaver. "What did you say?"

"It don't mean nothing," says Black John Wayne. "Not even. You must have me confused with somebody who gives a shit."

The Beaver says, "Well, that's not why I stopped by. Actually, we need to discuss an operation. The Major has decided that one last search-and-clear sweep, on the last day of the evacuation, would be a nice addition to First Platoon's already outstanding combat record. If your people score a good body count, there might even be a promotion in it for you."

Black John Wayne laughs. "Shit. The Reaper he want to run up a body count of black men.

Want to counter-frag me. LBJ he say we be the anchor of the northern defenses. We be the gallant little band holding the pass at Khe Sanh. So if we be here to fight, why we bugging out? This my last opportunity to be the black Davy Crockett. Pardon me if I just hunker down here until somebody inspires me with leadership."

The Beaver says, "Sergeant, the Major has issued written orders--"

"Decent. I'm all out of Sears and Roebuck catalogs to wipe my ass with. Dig it, chump?"

"Sergeant, the Major is your commanding officer."

Black John Wayne says, "The Reaper's Mickey Mouse orders don't mean shit to me, Jack. He a fucking pogue lifer the other other fucking pogue lifers left behind to shitcan him. Now he laying bad paper discharges on every black man that leave Khe Sanh alive. I'm ready to bust caps on his ugly ass."

"Respect the rank, Sergeant, not the man."

Black John Wayne says, "Beaver, you are tedious."

I say, "Beaver?"

"Yes?" says the Beaver. "Who's there?"

"It's me. The Joker."

"Excuse me, Private Joker, but this is between me and the Sergeant. Official platoon business. Now, I realize that as the former Platoon Sergeant--"

I say, "You got Eddie Haskell and Lumpy with you?"

"Who?"

"Your bodyguards. That little skinny skuz and the retarded fatbody."

From out of the dark comes the voice of Eddie Haskell, "Hey, go fuck yourself, Joker. That's not my name."

"We never did anything to you," whines Lumpy.

"Good. I just wanted to know where you were."

The Beaver says, "Sergeant, you will saddle up and stand by for a movement order."

Black John Wayne laughs his big booming laugh. "Beaver, you like one of them ol' bizarre shit-eatin' alligators we got back in New York City, man, crawlin' 'round down in the sewers.

You some kind of mu-tant. You adapted to this world of shit and you thriving on it, you just love it here, you can't get enough. You be prayin' that the war don't never end. You the little-boy king of Fat City in Viet Nam, you livin' off the tit. You like some kind of back-shooting pink spider, man, and you do scare me. Deadly poison taste like fine wine to a mean little mother like you, because you are the product of a diabolical mind."

The Beaver says, "I don't mean to be critical, Sergeant. But, after all, I am the Platoon Sergeant. Is that not correct?"

"On paper," someone says.

The Beaver says, "But, Major Travis--"

"Shut up, Beaver," I say. "Stow it and belay it and you can just dee-dee the fuck out of my area. The Grim Reaper can sit up in Sandbag City in starched skivvies, scratching his balls and playing war with his grid maps and his grease pencils and giving himself the Navy Cross every time he gets a mosquito bite. That's just fucking outstanding. That's far out. But his area is off limits to that fucking pogue lifer and his brown-nosers until we give

him a First Platoon passport, and we are not going to give him one. You want something from First Platoon, you don't even talk to Black John Wayne, you talk to me. I may be a slick-sleeved buck private to you, but I'm still H.M.I.C. around here."

"H.M.I.C.?"

"Head Motherfucker in Charge."

"Is that a fact?" says Beaver Cleaver.

I say, "Be advised, nobody from First Platoon is going to run any more of your dumb-ass sweeps. We will not pull patrols. We will not set ambushes. We will not go out on ops.

"Animal Mother took his squad out to waste the Phantom Blooper. Against my orders.

They've been missing in action for a week now.

"No way I'm going to piss away any more of my people defending a position that the lifers have already decided to shitcan," I say.

Eddie Haskell says, "What's wrong, Joker? No balls for a fight?"

I say, "I'm holding myself in reserve for the ground assault on Hanoi."

The Beaver says, "And what about the Marines in your platoon?"

I say, "I'm holding them in reserve too. How can I be a hero if I can't have my fans?"

"Joker," says the Beaver, "I am not your enemy. Why can't we work together and try to get along. For the good of the platoon."

I say, "Beaver, the only reason you like to get close to people is so that you won't miss when you decide to shit on them."

"But, Joker--"

I say, "You're a slick little silver-tongued monster, Beaver, and you are on my list."

Eddie Haskell says, "Joker, you're paranoid."

I say, "That's a rog on your last, scumbag. It's only after you stop being paranoid that they get you."

"Now, Joker," the Beaver says, "let's be reasonable. You are entitled to your opinion, of course. I can respect that. But you and I can work together. I mean that. I'm being sincere now."

I say, "Like you worked with Mr. Greenjeans?"

Pause. Someone moves in the darkness. "Who?"

"Mr. Greenjeans, motherfucker," says Black John Wayne. "Remember Mr. Greenjeans? You should remember him. You had the man iced."

Beaver Cleaver says, "If you're talking about some kind of fragging incident--"

"He was an outstanding company commander!" says Black John Wayne, almost growling.

"The skipper was one hell of a decent man. He was people, you son of a bitch. Captain Greenjeans was people!"

Someone says, "That's affirmative. He was a good Marine and a good officer. And the skipper had more balls than he knew what to do with."

The Beaver says, "I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about. I've never heard of the man. He sounds like--"

Someone says, "You never heard of him?"

The Beaver says, "It never happened. I don't believe that there ever was any such person.

Can anyone prove that this so-called Captain Greenjeans ever actually existed? Maybe you're just a little bit confused on that point.

"Anyway," the Beaver continues, "he had it coming. We've got an important job to do in Southeast Asia, an American job. Sacrifices have to be made. We've got to keep our head until this peace craze blows over. It's a hardball world and Communist aggression must be defeated at any price. What's wrong with spraying a few people with napalm if it makes the world a better place to live in? We are killing these people for their own good. Inside very gook is an American trying to get out."

Black John Wayne spits. "America invented Communism when they ran out of Indians."

The Beaver says, "But let's not worry about the past. What's done is done. That's blood under the bridge. Let's try to be constructive. There's no point in our talking in circles about unpleasant things which may or may not have happened."

"You murdered Mr. Greenjeans," I say. "Nobody gives a shit about your black-market deals.

You can sell fake NVA flags and chrome-plated shrapnel and you can flog off photographs of Ann-Margret's crotch in tight yellow capri pants. You can run watered-down whiskey and stepped-on dope and nobody cares if you trade off military equipment to the Viet Cong by the truckload.

"But Mr. Greenjeans caught your ass in the ville. Inside that steam-and-cream full of twelve-year-old whores that you own with that fat Gunny from Arkansas.

"You were trading a six-by loaded with crates of hand grenades for a seabag full of raw heroin. I wasted your customer. Remember? The gook cyclo driver who had a Viet Cong officer's credentials sewed up inside his hat. Then the Captain dragged your ass up to the command post and turned you in to the Grim Reaper. I was there, Beaver. I saw the whole thing."

Eddie Haskell says, "Joker, you're just a cynical misfit with an overly active imagination. So where's your evidence? Are those just words, or do you have some coonskins on the wall?"

Every man in the bunker can feel the strain in the Beaver's voice as he struggles to maintain his self-control: "Private Joker, I can certainly understand your resentment of me. You've got more time in than I have and you've been busted in rank. You've been under a lot of pressure, I know. I understand."

Beaver Cleaver pauses, then continues: "No one here believes that you wanted to kill your own best friend. What was his name? Cowboy? It was harsh of the Marine Corps to strip you of your stripes for failing to recover his body. I constantly reassure those who fear you because you have blown away a round-eyed Marine. And I do not believe the reports that you run around naked, that you sleep in mud, or that you are afraid to come out in the daytime.

These stories are exaggerations, I'm sure."

The Beaver's voice drones on in the dark. "We have had honest differences of opinions in the past, Private Joker, but I do want you to know that I have always had a lot of respect for you."

I say, "Talk smack to me."

Someone says, "The Beaver sells roger copy smack!"

Black John Wayne says, teasing, "Hey, Beaver, when we be talking about the bounty you got posted on the Joker's head?"

I say, "J.W., don't argue with the little puke. He's not even there."

"You right," Black John Wayne says. "Yeah, you right. He not even there."

The Beaver says, "Look, guys, I really do want to get to the bottom of this problem. It would be productive if we could clear it up once and for all.

But I guess we'll just never know for sure. I only wish I could be more helpful. Maybe this Captain you're talking about was killed in action. Or perhaps the Phantom Blooper got him."

Someone says, "Bullshit. That Claymore was set up inside the skipper's bunker. That means that the Phantom Blooper can walk on wire."

The Beaver says, "I don't know all the facts of this case, but I am going to find out. I promise you that. I'll file the papers to request a CID investigation. They will file an official report of the alleged incident."

"Just shut up," I say. "Just shut the fuck up."

"What?" says the Beaver. "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean by that."

Black John Wayne says, "The man say for you to shut up. You do what the man say or I will beat the white off your ass."

The Beaver makes another speech: "Now, Sergeant, there's no reason for anyone to get upset.

Let's all try to stay calm, okay? You may be right. Maybe if we can all just relax and think this thing through, we'll be able to find a logical explanation. But I do think we should at least try to get all the facts before we start jumping to any hasty conclusions."

The Marine in the bunker are silent, waiting.

On Armed Forces Radio, Billy Joe is throwing something off the Tallahatchie Bridge.

Suddenly the bunker is half filled with half-light from illumination flares popping outside.

Frozen in the cold magnesium light, Black John Wayne's face is a hard mask of ebony. He's glaring at the Beaver.

Black John Wayne wears jungle utilities dyed black. Around his neck hangs a heavy necklace of grenade pines. He's big. Black John Wayne started out in life as a black giant and monster, got tough on the streets, grew strong enough and tall, then took up body building.

The Beaver is pale and innocent, with a pug nose, chubby cheeks, and freckles. He's wearing a football jersey, blue jeans, tennis shoes and a blue baseball cap with NY in big white letters on the side. The Beaver, unlike the rest of us, is not carrying a weapon. The Beaver is slapping his palm with a bamboo swagger stick. The swagger stick has a Brasso'd .45-caliber shell casing on the tip.

Eddie Haskell sits on a bamboo footlocker in the corner of the bunker, poking at a ringworm scab on his ankle with the point of a bayonet. He's a skinny red-haired little rat-bastard with a face like a hungry weasel. He looks up, stabs the bayonet into a sandbag, shifts the pump-action shotgun on his lap to port arms.

Lumpy is near the bunker entrance, cringing into a shadow.

Black John Wayne gets up and walks, stooped over, stepping his way through a dozen black Marines in black jungle utilities. He leans down into the Beaver's face and grunts. "The Joker knows that you the beast because the Joker is a blue-eyed soul brother."

From a scuffed orange jungle boot with a dogtag in the laces Black John Wayne produces an ivory-handled straight razor. Snick. Out flashes six inches of fine surgical steel of the sharp shiny kind, for freelancers only.

Black John Wayne's Godzilla paw twists into the Beaver's football jersey and jerks the Beaver forward like a doll. The straight razor whips up to the Beaver's pink throat.

Black John Wayne says to the Beaver, "You want to belay them lies, or do you want a glass eye?"

Eddie Haskell makes his move. I dive across the bunker. I grab his collar and pull him down. Before he can get his shotgun out of the mud I lay my Tokarev 9-millimeter Russian officer's pistol hard upside his head.

Eddie Haskell slumps, groans, starts up again. I admire him for a cadence count, then I beat him unconscious with the butt of my pistol. His head is as hard as a shell casing.

The squad does not move.

Someone says, "Violence party! Violence party!"

"GET SOME!"

I cock my arm to souvenir Lumpy a love tap across the face.

Lumpy drops his M-16 and slides on out of the bunker.

I can hear him running away, slogging through the mud.

Locked in Black John Wayne's grip, the Beaver struggles desperately. When he sees that his bodyguards are gone, he starts bawling and lunging. Black John Wayne has got the Beaver in a death grip and he won't let go.

Light from illumination flares continues to be reflected into the bunker. Something very hairy must be going down outside. There's shouting, movement, and scattered small-arms fire.

Here inside the bunker the only sound is the Beaver trying to whine and breathe at the same time. His face is twisted into a spasming mask of stark terror.

The Beaver beats Black John Wayne in the face with his swagger stick. Black John Wayne shakes his head to clear his vision, as though annoyed by a fly.

Black John Wayne presses the blade in just under the Beaver's left eye. "Gonna cut him!" he says to me. Then to the Beaver: "Make you a believer!"

I do a chin-up on Black John Wayne's arm, which is about the size of my thigh and as hard as a boulder. "Negative," I say. "Stand down, J.W. We can't waste him. You're not back on the block doing your thing with a razor."

Black John Wayne looks at me. "Sure we can kill him. Who's going to stop us?"

I dig into my thigh pocket and pull out my det cord crimps. "Here. Take these."

"What?"

I say, "Come on, bro. Cut me a huss."

Black John Wayne shakes his head. "No. No way. Bullshit. Later for that."

"Do it, J.W. Trust me."

Black John Wayne groans and says, "Joker, m'man, you better thrill me." He hands me the straight razor and takes the det cord crimps.

The Beaver's bulging eyes follow the movement of the straight razor from Black John Wayne's hand to mine. The Beaver is bucking against the sandbagged bunker wall in a sort of spastic seizure of terror; he is going out of his mind with fear.

"Choke him," I say to Black John Wayne, and Black John Wayne chokes him.

Beaver Cleaver gags, moans, slobbers, and spits. His tongue sticks out, a slimy red garden slug.

Black John Wayne looks at me, then at the Beaver, then back at me again. I nod. "Get his tongue," I say, and Black John Wayne digs into the Beaver's mouth with the crimping pliers and clamps a grip onto the Beaver's tongue.

The Beaver's eyes are bulging out of their sockets. I hold the blade flat on his tongue and he gags and I smile and say, "Are we communicating?"

When the Beaver whimpers and his eyes beg, I say, "Sin Loi, Beaver--tough shit. Be advised, mercy is not what I do best." I pull the razor and the blue blade slices smoothly through the Beaver's tongue an inch deep, splitting the tip. Blood squirts out with such force that it shoots all the way across the bunker and splatters in a shiny wet pattern across the gray wall of sandbags.

Black John Wayne releases his grip on the Beaver and the Beaver drops to his knees. Blood pours out over the Beaver's lower lip and drips down his chin like drool. The Beaver makes a horrible nonsound, with his hands in front of his face, afraid to touch.

Someone says, "Charlie got a bloop gun!"

Eddie Haskell moans, rubs his head, tries to get up.

Outside the bunker, small-arms fire pops up urgently a hundred yards down the perimeter and incoming mortar shells start falling.

I step outside in time to see Private Owens, the New Guy, waddling past the bunker at a double-time, squealing in his high-pitched voice: "SAPPERS IN THE WIRE! SAPPERS IN

THE WIRE!"

As the scattered small-arms fire is picked up all along the perimeter, Black John Wayne's people double-time out of the bunker and we all haul ass into the shit.

Howitzer shells arc out over our heads. Recoilless rifles belch flechette darts in murderous prickly clouds. Claymores explode, raining deadly steel balls. Blips of red light blink across the fields of fire and interlace into wavering hypnotic patterns.

Ignoring the fact that our supporting arms are slaughtering them, crack assault troops from the 304th NVA Division, the heroes of Dien Bien Phu, men harder than grenades, pour into attack lanes blown in our wire by the Dac Cong, elite sappers teams, crawling naked and greased through our wire under fire.

The sappers shove bangalore torpedoes--bamboo packed with TNT--into the concertina, tanglefoot, and mine fields. The sappers detonate the bangalores by hand, blowing themselves into bloody chunks of meat so their friends can get at us.

As I double-time along the perimeter I check the slit trenches for non-hackers, juice freaks, and heads. I drag out the sleepy, the confused, and the angry. Every Marine at Khe Sanh is bone tired, fed up, and wasted. But they are United States Marines. So they get their heads and asses wired together, grab their pieces, and double-time toward the sound of the guns.

I ignore the Beaver's junkies. The junkies don't even carry weapons anymore. Three heroin addicts have climbed up onto the black metal carcass of a burned truck. With faces like empty rooms and eyes like slivers of egg white, they watch the battle.

Bullets bounce off the deck.

I dive into the guard bunker in the First Platoon area, twisting my ankle in the process and knocking a chunk of skin off of my damned knee.

Thunder and Daddy D.A. are already on deck. Daddy D.A., honcho of Second Platoon, is manning the field radio, calling in close air support. He says to me, "The birds are in the air.

Phantoms and B-52s."

Thunder stands on a firing parapet of dirt-filled rope-handled artillery shell crates, calmly sighting in with the Redfield sniper's scope on his Remington 700 high-powered hunting rifle.

On quiet days when NVA grunts with a piece of slack sit swapping scuttlebutt and scarfing up a few bennies, a thousand yards downrange, sometimes bang, their commanding officer's brains come out, leaving the NVA snuffies squatting in the treeline with mouths open because they never even heard a shot.

"Thunder," I say. "Want some, get some."

Thunder looks back at me, grins, gives me a thumbs-up.

I should remind Thunder that this is not the time to be an artist, and that he should bust caps.

But I know that Thunder has his own style. Thunder has said many times, "I am the aristocrat of snipers--I only shoot officers."

Thunder's Remington kicks, crack-ka, and somewhere in beautiful downtown Hanoi there's a gook mama-san who does not know that she no longer has a son.

First Platoon is on the firing line, selector switches on full automatic rock and roll, putting out the rounds, chopping brass, breathing through their mouths, eyes big, necks way down into their flak jackets like muddy

turtles, assholes puckered to the max, balls up in their throats, slapping aluminum magazines into their black plastic rifles with a jerky rhythm and holding the triggers down.

Boom.

"Oh, FUCK."

"Shit."

"R.P.G.," I say--rocket-propelled grenade. Beaucoup pucker factor.

"Son of a bitch!"

"THERE!"

"Where?" says Thunder, scanning with his sniper's scope. "Come on...come on..." He adjusts his sling for a tighter grip. "Come on, baby..." Ignoring the AK fire punching holes into the outboard side of our bunker, Thunder sets the dope on his weapon and squeezes off a round.

Crack-ka.

Thunder looks back at us, grins, gives us a thumbs-up. "Grease one. Ah, be advised, Khe Sanh Six, that's one confirmed on your R.P.G." He wiggles his eyebrows, makes a face, and laughs, a dark-haired handsome boy with perfect teeth. He leans back into his sniper's scope, laughs, and then, crack-ka, shoots somebody else.

M-16s are whacking and whacking and AK-47s are popping and popping and the two sounds collide, blending together in an unending roar like the passing of a train on a rickety track.

On the perimeter to port, Black John Wayne's squad of street Marines is making a stand.

Sappers are heaving in satchel charges and laying bamboo ladders on top of the wire.

Hardcore NVA grunts hit the wire running. And as fast as they come up, Black John Wayne and his men kill them, chop, chop, blood on the wire.

Gray smoke from our 105 howitzer drifts over our position. The smoke stinks of cordite and smells like the sulfur that burns in hell. Sand fills the air, a fine red mist. Our bunker is shaking nonstop now as the sandbagged walls absorb incoming small-arms fire and the thud of grenades.

"Shit," says Daddy D.A., dropping the field radio handset. "The zoomies say E.T.A. two-zero minutes."

Thunder squeezes off a round, crack-ka, and says, "They're coming through the wire."

The whole base is lit up now, with dozens of illumination flares wobbling down under small white parachutes, leaving faint luminescent worm trails. Everything looks phony, lifeless, stark, and stagy, like an abandoned set for a low-budget monster movie. The battlefield before us is a noisy, black-and-white outdoor classroom for student gravediggers. Cold white light of abnormal intensity casts shadows that are dark, deep, and deformed.

I look to port. I say, "D.A., call this in to the C.P.--reaction force to Sandbag City. I want them to set in and stand by for a movement order. Tell the cannon cockers to stand by to fire on Black John Wayne's position at my command. Black John Wayne is going to be overrun."

Daddy D.A. grunts. "You got it, Joker."

The gooks are coming at us in a human wave assault, a swaying wall of massed men, pouring into our wire, spilling into the gaps blown by the sappers. When they're hit, dying enemy grunts remember to fall flat across the wire so that their friends in the next wave can use their dead bodies as stepping stones. They come in through automatic rifle fire, mines, grenades, and .50-caliber machine guns. They come in through salvos of artillery shells that weight ninety-five pounds each. The human waves come on in, crashing into the thin green line, soaking up all of our ordinance and our anger and hit by so many shells and bullets that they can't fall down.

An ocean of highly motivated yellow midgets ready to pay the price is flooding up the hill, bringing beaucoup pain for grunts.

As I burn up magazines in my M-16 I feel proud to be attacked by these brass-balled little hardasses, and proud to be killing them. The most inspiring thing I've seen around here lately are these NVA gooks and the way they attack. They come in lean and mean, the best light infantry since the Stonewall Brigade.

Thunder looks back at us and says, "Black John Wayne is being overrun."

Black John Wayne's squad of black Marines is standing tall in the perimeter trench.

Black John Wayne stands flat-footed above the trenchline, bigger than King Kong, and fires his M-60 machine gun point-blank into a rolling wave of about one million NVA gooks.

Black John Wayne and the bloods fight hand to hand until they are cut off and surrounded.

Thunder, Daddy D.A., and I are all out of the bunker quicker than a gook can shit rice, hauling ass down the slippery catwalk, jerking New Guys to their feet.

By the time we double-time to Black John Wayne's position there are fifty Marines with us, from four different platoons, and we're pumping, pumping, a little adrenaline cocktail to cleanse the blood, pumping on wild animal anger and righteous indignation, pumping, pumping, we are United States grunts and we have come down to battle, and by God we can't wait to kill anybody who fucks with our friends, we're running into the black metal whirlwind like big-assed birds, we are all going to die and we just can't wait because life in the shit is a rush and we feel alive and perfect and goddamn beautiful, because we are being who we came here to be, and we are doing what we came here to do, and we are doing it really good, and we know it.

Black John Wayne hangs tough, firing his M-60 until the barrel glows red and white. But an NVA flame thrower roars across the trenchline and then Black John Wayne is a black man wearing fire as formal attire and his bulky body jerks like a puppet and he dances as M-16

rounds in his bandoliers cook off, and then the M-60 in his hands blows up, and Black John Wayne is still standing, while advancing NVA troops move around him and out of his way.

He holds on to his throat with both hands, like a man trying to strangle himself, or like a man trying to pull off his own head. And he falls.

We hit the rice-propelled Communist gooks in the left flank and we cut them up good. We pop their arms and legs off. We spread out above the perimeter and isolate each pocket of NVA grunts inside our wire and we blast them until they are unrecognizable chunks of dead meat wrapped in dirty rags. We shoot them at such close range that powder burns set fire to their khaki shirts.

We jump down on top of them in the trenchline and we beat them to death with entrenching tools and we stab them in the face with K-bar knives and we chop off their heads with machetes.

Then we stand up in our perimeter trench and face outboard and fire a blinking stream of hard red iron into balls, bellies, and thighs, and we cut them down as they come up the hill.

Somewhere someone is swearing at God and somewhere a chorus of November Hotels, non-hackers, begs, "CORPSMAN! CORPSMAN! CORPSMAN!"

We don't care. Fuck the wounded and fuck their candy-ass personal problems. We don't have time to listen to their crying. The flood of little yellow soldiers is falling back, out of our reach, and this drives us crazy.

We climb out of the trenchline and slide on our asses into our own wire and we climb over dead gooks piled three deep and we kick tangled, blasted strands of barbed wire out of our way and we chase the retreating wall of noise and muzzle flashes, and at every movement, scream, and sound we fire our hot rifles blindly until we run out of ammunition. Then we rob ammunition from our dead.

By battle magic a gook pops up in front of me. He runs at me, firing as he comes. Magic jerks my M-16 out of my hands. The gook is busting caps with a full banana clip, spraying the area with thirty rounds of AK to cut himself a path.

Dirt jumps up off the deck and hits me in the face.

I draw my Tokarev automatic pistol from my shoulder holster and I shoot the gook in the chest. He comes on, firing, bayonet fixed. I can see his clean-cut teenage face, his flat nose, his crudely cropped black hair, his black gook eye. I shoot him in the chest twice and the rounds jerk him up, but he's still coming.

Fingers of hot air tug at my jungle utilities like magic. I feel like a clown without any lines to say in a slapstick comedy war movie. I'm expected to stand here and look tough while this gook magician guts me with a bayonet. The situation is pretty damned embarrassing. How far can dead man run?

I don't know what I'm supposed to do, so I shoo the gook four more times before he slams into me like a miniature linebacker and knocks me down and runs over me and then I'm falling and when I hit the deck with my face a major earthquake hits Khe Sanh and my eardrums burst.

After the blackness fades to sunlight and the earthquake is over, I'm sitting on the deck among butchered things, works of the black art I have helped to create. The NVA dead all look like failed contortionists. Stretcher bearers and corpsmen are picking through the dirty red driftwood of battle, gooks, half-gooks, and pieces of gooks. The stretcher bearers load up with

friendly wounded and carry them away, leaving behind dead Marines wrapped in muddy ponchos.

Grunts walk by without speaking, their eyes locked on the horizon but not seeing, eyes rimmed with red, eyes locked inside sweaty faces caked with dust thrown up by the shells, the unfocused eyes of the half-dead staring in astonished disbelief at the strange land of the half-alive--the thousand-yard stare.

Daddy D.A. is standing over me, yelling, but I can't hear anything. I put my hands on my ears.

Dead on the deck beside me is a gook with pink plastic guts piled on his chest. The guts are crawling with black flies. On the dead gook's ankles are loops of comm wire his friends would have used to drag his dead body off into the jungle.

A squeaky elf's voice real far away says, "You shot his heart out! You shot his heart out!"

I say to Daddy D.A.: "Huh?"

Suddenly my field of vision is invaded by the ruddy face of the Grim Reaper, the dumbest twenty-year Major in the Marine Corps and the biggest shitbird on the planet. He's yelling.

His voice fades in and out, which is okay with me, because judging from the scowl on the Reaper's face he's not saying anything I want to hear.

"I'll run your ass up on charges!" the Reaper says to me. He leans down, thumbs out his collar, taps his gold rank insignia with a bony forefinger. "I will bust you below private!"

Smiling, I say, "You're on my list, Reaper."

The Reaper snears, struts away.

As my hearing returns, Daddy D.A. gives me the straight skinny. The Reaper is going to write me up on an Article 15, office hours, because the Beaver told the Reaper that the reason we were caught off guard by the ground attack was because I was sleeping on guard duty.

But I won't face a court-martial because the Beaver, as my Platoon Sergeant, stood up for me and asked the Reaper to go easy on me because I'm crazy.

The ground attack was only a probe in force. Our gungy counterattack was a waste of time and good grunts. The Reaper had already issued the order for the rifle companies on our flanks to retreat. Khe Sanh would have

fallen on its last day in existence if the B-52s had not arrived. The bombers dropped a tight pattern of two-thousand pound blockbusters one hundred yards outside our wire, saving our asses, one more time.

The Beaver, D.A. explains, is being put in for the Silver Sat for heroism under fire because he claims he personally led the counterattack. And the Beaver will be awarded a Purple Heart for a painful mouth wound he received during brutal hand-to-hand combat with elite North Vietnamese troops. Finally, the Reaper plans to recommend the Beaver for promotion to Staff Sergeant due to meritorious service.

Daddy D.A. is asking me if I feel okay and am I sure I'm not hit when the Reaper and the Beaver dittybop by. The Beaver glances over at me, preens a little, and smirks a lot. Eddie Haskell and Lumpy follow three paces behind. Eddie Haskell gives me what is supposed to be a real mean look, then gives me the finger.

The Reaper puts his arm around the Beaver's shoulders and says, "I do like to see the arms and legs fly!" The Beaver nods and nods, tries to smile, tries to speak, winces in pain, and Daddy D.A. and I get a quick glimpse of the heavy black thread knotted through the tip of the Beaver's tongue. Daddy D.A. is confused when I start laughing hard enough to crack a rib.

The Beaver looks over at us, puzzled, and I roar.

Some salty Corporal from Third Platoon souvenirs us a couple of warm beers. There's mud in my beer but I don't care; there's mud on my teeth. All I can think about is how the rising sun hurts my eyes. I want to crawl up into my Conex box and sleep for one thousand years.

Daddy D.A. helps me to stand up. But before we climb back up to the perimeter, Daddy D.A.

and I drink a toast to the Viet Cong grunt dead on the deck at our feet, an enemy individual so highly motivated that he KO'd my fat American ass even after I dinged him and zapped him and waste him and killed him, in so many, so many times.

I say, "We can't beat these people, D.A. We can kill them, sometimes, but we are never going to beat them."

Daddy D.A. crushes the empty beer can in his hand and throws it away. He looks at me and says, "There it is."

Somewhere a corpsman says, "This one's still alive. Stop the hemorrhaging and clean away the mud."

After the battle I strip naked and curl up inside my Conex box and I have nightmares about the Viet Cong.

All Viet Cong are press-ganged at the point of a gun, brainwashed, shot full of heroin, then taken to the basement of the Kremlin, where evil Communist scientists insert tiny control monitors into the backs of their heads.

Viet Cong farmers are like the land itself and their bodies are made of earth. The Viet Cong have magic powers which allow them to sink into the soil and disappear.

Like yellow sharks the Viet Cong glide through an ocean of brown Asian soil. With cold lidless eyes, with predator's eyes, the Viet Cong swim silently just under our feet, preparing to strike.

The Viet Cong hump away from Khe Sanh carrying their heads and arms and legs. Back in their villages they will sit in shadows while their pretty Viet Cong girlfriends sew the shrapnel-torn extremities back on with oversized needles and heavy black thread, and apply leaf-bandages. During the night the pretty Viet Cong girlfriends will heal the red-edged and black-stitched wounds with herbs and the root of the wild banana tree and hot bowls of rice and lots of kisses.

The Americans fill up the soil with Viet Cong bones, really fill it up, totally, so that the Viet Cong farmers can't find one ounce of earth in which to plant a rice stalk. The Viet Cong refuse to surrender, and choose to starve. The bones of the staring Viet Cong stack up and cover the surface of Viet Nam and pile up higher and higher until they blot out the sun.

Americans fear the dark, so they leave Viet Nam and call in victory.

On a night when there's no moon to shine on their magic, the Viet Cong bones reassemble themselves into people. Finally, talking and laughing, the Viet Cong are free to walk hand in hand across the surface of their own land, the land of their ancestors.

In my nightmare my friend Cowboy is down, shot through both legs, his balls shot off, an ear gone. A bullet through his cheeks has torn out his gums. Cowboy is being shot to pieces by a sniper in the jungle. The sniper has already zapped Alice, the big black point man, and has mutilated two Marines who went out to save Cowboy--Doc J., and Parker, the New Guy. The sniper is shooting Cowboy to pieces so that the rest of the squad will try to save him and then the sniper can kill us all, and Cowboy too.

One more time, in my nightmare, Cowboy stares at me with eyes paralyzed with fear, and his hands open to me like language and I fire a short burst from my grease gun and one round goes into Cowboy's left eye and rips out through the back of his head, knocking out brain-wet clods of hairy meat. And Cowboy is dead, shot through the brain.

Click. Click-click.

What is that sound? I wake up. I grab my piece. It must the Phantom Blooper. The Phantom Blooper has come to gut me.

Click. Click-click.

I track the clicking sound until I find Daddy D.A. inside an empty Conex box a few boxes down from my next. Daddy D.A. is hunkered down in the dark, dry-firing his .45 automatic into his head.

I climb into the four-by-four-foot gray metal air-freight container. I squat down into a shadow. I don't say anything.

I don't look at his face. Daddy D.A. is a recruiting poster Marine, with a square chin, steel-gray hair, and a neatly trimmed mustache. But now his face is oily with sweat and contorted.

His eyes are wild. He looks like a drunk who's about to cry. But he won't.

Daddy D.A. is a lifer, a career Marine, but he only just decided to be one, so he's still almost human. And since Donlon rotated back to the World and I lost my last link with reality, Daddy D.A. has been my best friend.

I'm afraid to die alone, but even more afraid to go home.

About a month ago, D.A. and I were riding security for a convoy of Coca-Colas. I was hitching a ride with D.A. and one of his squads in a six-by mounted with a 50.

We were rolling through one of those jampacked cardboard villes that straddle Route 1. The gooks were picking through garbage piles to find something to eat.

We saw this little gook kid trying to eat a piece of Styrofoam, and it made us laugh, because the little gook would take a bite, make a face, spit it out, then take another bite.

The squad was cutting Zs, lying on the double layer of sandbags in the bed of the truck.

Daddy D.A. and I were standing by the 50, eyeballing the gooks.

Going by like a Technicolor movie was a parade of skinny gooks in white conical hats and squares of rice-paddy water and half-ton water buffaloes with brass rings in their noses and Arvin Rangers in red berets and firetearms of teenaged whores who flashed bee-sting tits at us, and we watched farmers hunched over, knee deep in paddy water, pulling at rice stalks.

I was eating fruit cocktail out of a gallon can with my fingers, pawing through the sticky fruit, picking out the cherries.

The convoy slowed down in the ville, and this ugly gook kid with a cleft palate comes running up, selling pineapple slices on toothpicks. "You give me one cigarette! You give me one cigarette!"

Suddenly the ugly good kid swung his cardboard box full of pineapple slices up into the truck bed.

Daddy D.A. was the gunner in the 50 mount. He swings the 50 around and his whole body shakes boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom and the kid exploded and was splattered all over the side of the road like a butchered chicken.

Then the six-by came apart and D.A. and I floated up and squad was sucked into a vortex of translucent black fire and then as suddenly as that it was all over and Daddy D.A. was trying to help me up out of the road.

My head had hit the road hard. Daddy D.A. lifted me p and I spat out grit and on the deck all around us were pieces of men. Some pieces were moving, some not. All of the pieces were on fire. The six-by was on its side and on fire and every one of Daddy D.A.'s people was a legless ball-less wonder.

"You're plain fucking crazy," I say to D.A., trying not to think about the painful past.

Daddy D.A. looks at me, then looks at the gun in his hand. "There it is."

I shrug. I say, "Sorry 'bout that."

Daddy D.A. says, "I'm a lifer, Joker. Hell, I love this damned Marine Corps an' shit. But Khe Sanh was never a battle: it's been a publicity stunt. And green Marines are not elite troops; we're movie stars. The Marines at Khe Sanh were just show business for Time magazine.

We're straight men, feeding lines to the gooks. The brass has demoted us to being live bait for supporting arms. We're nothing more than glorified forward observers, recon for an avalanche of bombs and shells. Guns have

made war less than a gentleman's sport. Modern weapons are taking all of the fun out of killing. We might as well just prop up some wooden Marines like duck decoys and dee-dee back to the World and get pogue jobs and make lots of money."

I don't say anything.

"Hunker down, they say. Dig in. But Marines are not construction workers. We don't dig.

We get wired. Dee-Dee Mao is not part of our creed. We are stone-hard kickers of enemy ass."

I say, "I heard that."

"Last week there must have been two platoons of civilian pukes in spit-shined safari jackets strutting around Khe Sanh, making exciting TV shows, telling the civilian pukes back in the World that we'd won another big victory and that the siege of Khe Sanh had been broken and how the American Marines had held Khe Sanh, blah-blah-blah, but how it sounded was that somehow the TV viewers at home deserved to take a bow for what Marines did alone."

I say, "That's affirmative."

Daddy D.A. looks up at me. "So now we're sneaking out the back door like hippies who can't pay the rent. The evacuation of Khe Sanh is a secret back home but it's not a secret from Victor Charlie."

"There it is."

"So whose side are we on?"

I say, "We're trying to be the good guys, D.A., but we're trying too hard."

Daddy D.A. says, "Before we came to Khe Sanh, the VC slept in the old French bunker.

Tomorrow night they'll be sleeping in it again. What goes around comes around. But what about the twenty-six hundred good grunts that got hit here? Do you think those guys will ever forget the price we paid to hold Khe Sanh? And what about the guys who died here?

What about Cowboy?"

"Well," I say, "if I felt that bad, I wouldn't kill myself. I'd kill somebody else."

"Get out of my face, Joker. Asshole."

"You're short again, D.A. Don't extend this time. You're short. Rotate back to the World.

Cut yourself a piece of slack. You owe it to yourself."

"Hell, Joker, I wouldn't know what to do with myself back in the World. The only people I've ever understood and the only people who ever understood me are these hard-headed raggedy-assed grunts."

"So stand on the block and count the women."

He looks at me, almost laughing. "Shit."

I grunt. "Shit."

Daddy D.A. says, "Remember back when Cowboy was our squad leader in Hue City?

Remember the baby-san?"

I look at my boots. "Yeah, I remember. That damned Hue City."

"She came right up to us in the middle of a firefight," says Daddy D.A. "Inside the Citadel.

She pushed that little cart up and was selling Cokes with ice, under fire."

"'Where are the VC?'

"And the girl said, 'You VC.'

"We said, 'You baby-san VC.'

"And she said, 'No VC. VC number ten thousand.'

We said, "'Baby-san, you boom-boom?' And she giggled, remember? She said, 'You give me beaucoup money.'"

I say, "Let it go, D.A. That's ancient history."

But D.A. is already running the Hue City movie in his head: "Some dumb grunt was crying.

I don't know his name. Just some dumb grunt with a personal problem.

"The baby-san squatted down in front of the grunt. She was so cute. She picked up his helmet--she could hardly lift it--and put it on. The helmet completely covered her head. She looked funny. The grunt laughed. He stopped crying and lifted the helmet off of her. She giggled.

"The little bitch ran over to her cart and got the grunt a cold bottle of Coke and opened it an'

shit and ran back and gave it to him. 'I souvenir you,' she said, 'Marine number one!'

"The grunt laughed again, leaned back, and was chugging the Coke. The baby-san pulled a Chi-Com frag out of her ice bucket, jerked out the pin, shoved it under the open flap of the grunt's flak jacket and held it on his bare chest as he finished chugging the Coke.

"Then the grunt looked down, remember? Remember that look on his face? He looked down and then the grunt and the baby-san melted into a ball of smoke and then noise turned them into shit."

"I know," I say. "I remember."

D.A. says, "Joker, when babies blow themselves up to kill a grunt, something is definitely wrong with the program. I came here to Viet Nam to kill gooks, not little kids. Little kids don't become gooks until they grow up. But even zip babies come out of the womb armed to the teeth and hating Marines, Joker, and I don't know why. How can we wean them from the propaganda printed in their mother's milk? I'm supposed to be a professional fighting man.

How is it going to look on my service record if I get killed by a little kid? It's not dignified.

Who are we, Joker? We're grunts. We're supposed to be the best. What's wrong with us?"

I stand up. "I got to go police up some dead gooks."

Daddy D.A. looks up, surprised. "But you can't just go off somewhere and police up dead gooks. Now now. I'm going to kill myself."

I say, "Without any bullets?"

"I was just practicing. I got bullets."

I say, "Okay, so what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, you know, you're supposed to talk me out of it, an' shit."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

Daddy D.A. thinks about it. "Well, you know, you say, 'life is good.'"

"Life is good."

D.A. says, "No, it's not."

I say, "You're right. It sucks. Life is crummy."

Daddy D.A. is not sure what to say next. Then: "Why don't you tell me how much I'd be missed?"

I nod, thinking about it. "Yeah, okay. Well, I'd miss you, D.A. And Thunder. Maybe. I mean, Thunder never liked you, but he'd probably miss you. The New Guys won't miss you because they're too dumb to know who

you are. Black John Wayne would miss you, but he's off on a one-way tour with the KIA travel bureau. And even if Black John Wayne was alive he'd probably just say Sin Loi, tough shit, sorry about that."

"There it is." Daddy D.A. nods. "There it is. Sorry 'bout that." He laughs.

I say, "Want a cold beer?"

"That's affirmative on your last," says Daddy D.A., looking up, brightening. "I sure could use one."

I say, "Well, when you find some slack, D.A., you be sure to souvenir a big piece for me."

I leave Daddy D.A.'s Conex box and march back to my own. The sky on the horizon is turning pink and pale blue.

Dawn at Khe Sanh. As the day suddenly turns real, dew glistens on a shantytown of tents built with shelter halves and muddy ponchos. From the last of the decaying bunkers still standing and from the mouths of manmade caves, hard reptile men poke steel-helmeted heads out into the cold morning air, squinting, their faces stubble-bearded, bulky in their flak jackets and baggy jungle utilities, with weapons growing out of their hands like black metal deformities. They walk hunched over and fast in the Khe Sanh quick-step, humping ankle-deep in red mud, grunts, skuzzy field Marines, slouching half-awake toward burlap-wrapped piss tubes that no longer exist, scratching their balls.

A sky train helicopter lifts a howitzer off the deck and whack-whacks into a sky the color of lead. The howitzer dangles like a big toy on the end of a steel cable.

I crawl up into my gray metal hole and I try to sleep.

Outside, an engineer yells, loud and bored, "FIRE IN THE HOLE! FIRE IN THE HOLE!"

Whomp.

Thuds and thumps are doing what enemy gunners have been having wet dreams about doing for months. They are tearing up some of the perforated steel planking from the airfield and loading it onto trucks. They use burning brooms to set fires. There are so many fires that most of the guys are wearing gas masks. The engineers are blowing up the last bunker with blocks of C-4 while working parties of tired grunts chop into sandbags with

E-tools and machetes. Growling bulldozers bury any remaining trash beneath tons of red mud.

I curl up into a ball to hide and wait for darkness. I close my eyes and I try to dream. If I'm going to go one on one with the Phantom Blooper I need my beauty sleep.

If I don't kill the Phantom Blooper before we leave Khe Sanh, he will live forever.

Sometimes my dreams are too noisy, and sometimes my dreams are too quiet, and sometimes I can hear the sound of shrapnel going off in my mind.

Do you remember coonskin caps? Be sure you're right, then go ahead." Your mother bought you a pair of Davy Crockett socks and you rode to school in a big yellow bus and you sang,

"The King of the Wild Frontier."

When was the last time you made a shadow monster on the ceiling of your bedroom by making your hands into a claw and holding it over a flashlight in the dark?

Do you remember Old Maid and jug-roller marbles and jawbreaker candy and prisms that made rainbows on the wall and Red Ryder BB guns and baseball cards in your bicycle spokes and how you sold flower seeds door to door?

Do you remember when Annette Funicello was a cute twelve-year-old Mouseketeer every kid was in love with and arrowhead hunting in cornfields after a rain and how to pump your arm to signal train conductors to toot their air horns and the Johnson Smith Company of Racine, Wisconsin, and *PRIZES* in Post Toasties and how you pretended to have the power to cut down telephone poles by holding your arm straight out while riding in the pickup truck with your father (carefully avoiding metal signs that might dent your blade), and do you remember the man who came to your high school and made pieces of Africa with air-filled rubber--do you remember the man who made balloon giraffes?

The monsoon rain is coming down hard and cold and the New Guy I put through Grenade School is falling asleep on guard duty, hunkered down in a hole where the guard bunker used to be, a poncho liner wrapped around his shoulders like an Indian blanket.

Cutting zulus, the New Guy nods forward, pulls himself a little rack time, then jerks his head up, opens his eyes, and looks around.

Within two minutes the New Guy's eyes narrow down to slits and his head nods forward again. When you're on guard duty, sleep is the most valuable thing in the world.

Staring into a night as black as hell's steel door, I slide past the dozing New Guy and down into our wire.

I salute Sorry Charlie, a human skull mounted on a stake in the wire. The napalm-blackened skull is wearing a pair of felt Mickey Mouse ears.

Naked except for a beat-up old Stetson on my head, and armed with an M-79 grenade launcher, and with the Kid From Brooklyn's prick-25 field radio on my back, I double-time into No Man's Land across a post-atomic dark and bloody ground.

Stars & Stripes says that the brass have been debating about using nuclear weapons to protect Khe Sanh, which has already been the target of more bombs and shells than any place in the history of warfare. The zoomies, on average, fly bombing missions within two miles of Khe Sanh every five minutes and and drop an average of five thousand bombs a day.

From sterile red soil which has been blasted with more firepower than a six-pack of Hiroshima bombs, dragons of ground mist rise up to swallow me. Gigantic bomb craters pockmark the deck. If I fall into a shell hole I'll either break my neck or drown.

Mud sucks at my naked feet and slows me down the way it always does in nightmares when the monster is chasing you. The sucking of the mud is embarrassingly noisy.

A star cluster flare shoots up, to the north. I squat and freeze. Somebody on a night ambush is coming in early. They must have wounded.

I wait until No Man's Land is silent, so silent that even the frogs have shut up. Then I hump, and every piece of darkness has something mean and ugly hiding in it, and every shadow is full of ghosts with iron teeth, but I don't care.

Somewhere to the north, up in the black and green silence of the Dong Tri Mountains, in a small clearing in the jungle in a place without a name, Cowboy is dead where I left him.

Cowboy is dead from the bullet I put through his brain.

Doc J.-for-joint is there, and Alice, and Parker, the New Guy. They're all up there somewhere, men who died not at a place but at a grid coordinate,

scattered bones now, torn apart by tigers and eaten by ants. I want to live with the tigers and the ants. I want to be with my friends.

The Phantom Blooper laughs.

I stop and listen. The Phantom Blooper laughs again.

The grunts standing lines on the perimeter hear the Blooper and get wired. There's shouting and movement. In ten seconds illumination flares are going to be popping up all over this A-O.

I get a feeling that tells me I am in the process of becoming someone's favorite sight picture.

The Phantom Blooper starts talking but I can't quite hear what he's saying and I hope that the grunts on the perimeter can't hear him either because the Phantom Blooper's grasp of the situation is too damned precise and if we listen to him we'll all go plain fucking crazy.

Using my ears like an animal, I stalk the Phantom Blooper. My ears pick up each dot of sound.

Bam. An M-79 grenade lifts a chunk of the deck in front of me, splattering me with mud and shrapnel.

Dark shadows danced and turn into monsters and larger, darker shadows swallow them.

Someone screams into my ear: "MORE ILLUM! MORE ILLUM! GOD DAMN, MORE

LIGHT!"

In the Marine Corps a mine detector means that you close your eyes, put your foot out, and feel around. As I probe for mines with my toes I have a fantasy in my brain housing group in which my battle tactics turn out exactly as planned.

My fantasy of how I can be a hero begins like a movie inside my mind.:

...I have talked tough to the Phantom Blooper and I have debated, and because I am so interesting the Phantom Blooper has listened, and because I am so clever I have kept the Phantom Blooper stumped on complex philosophical questions. In fact, the Phantom Blooper is so determined to win the debate that he fails to notice that the sun has come up.

From a cloudless blue sky four First Marine Air Wing F-4 camouflage-painted Phantom fighter-bombers on Tac-Air standby slide in low and booming, locked and cocked and bingo on fuel. In my fantasy I speak the

magic secret formula of numbers into the Kid From Brooklyn's field radio. I say, "Watch my smoke to target and expend all remaining."

Flames shoot out of the tails of my fantasy Phantom bombers as they hit their afterburners and roll over, banking gracefully. Marine pilots perform a ballet of aircraft and boon in to give the Phantom Blooper a taste of the only true American art form, the surgical air strike.

Fantasy silver napalm canisters and fantasy black bombs tumble down from the aircraft. Hell in very small packages. Napalm canisters tumble down two at a time, end over end, floating, glinting in the sunlight, followed by a pair of Xs on black dots--snake eyes and nape, want some, get some.

The sky opens up and a piece of the sun breaks loose and falls down through airless space to the earth and the piece of sun hits the earth and splatters sacred gold fire across No Man's Land, a world of hurt coming down, rolling flames and thudding explosions.

Inside the boiling rage of the orange and black fireball the Phantom Blooper and I die horrible deaths as all of the air is sucked out of our lungs by force and we suffocate and in the next red moment our bodies are burned to the bone and beyond and we are two nameless Crispy Critters trapped forever inside a red and black daytime nightmare...

But that's only a fantasy.

One moment I'm trapped inside a piece of the sun, and the Phantom Blooper and I are getting payback for burning Viet Nam alive, and four Marine pilots are radioing in, "Ah, roger that.

Two confirmed, K.B.A., Killed By Air." And the next moment my beautiful happy fantasy is over and I'm abruptly back in the real world. It's dark, I'm cold, and it's raining.

Hunkered down in the dark, butt-naked in a bombed-out wasteland. I'm muddy and stung by shrapnel. And my feet are cut all to shit.

A lone illumination shell from the 81 mike-mike mortars section hisses up in a high arc, pops, burns, pours down a football field of harsh white light.

The air I'm breathing turns into bullets and angry blips of red neon try to find my eyes. I know that the New Guy was sleeping, woke up when the Blooper laughed, got scared enough to shoot his own shadow, started

working the 60 without remembering that I ordered him to use a frag or call in arty so that he wouldn't give away his position.

The New Guy, Private Owens, has just fired a shot in anger; he's not a New Guy anymore.

I hear footsteps.

A hot sledgehammer hits me and knocks me down. I try to get up. My mouth goes dry in an instant and my stomach turns sour. I can't breathe. I've been shot. That fucking New Guy has shot me and I try to say to him: "You're in the hurt locker now, sweet pea." But all that comes out is a cough.

I lift myself up onto an elbow and I hold my M-79 in one hand and I fire, bloop, at the expansive target of the New Guy's ignorance. There's a silence and then the New Guy's area comes all to pieces in slow motion. A cadence count later, the fragmentation round thuds.

The whole perimeter opens fire. Tracer rounds probe the darkness.

I think maybe I'm dying.

Cold hands grip my ankles. I kick. I try to kick the hands away but they are too strong. The field radio on my back snags on a root and is pulled off. I'm being dragged away, toward the jungle.

Struggling to stay conscious, I try to talk tough to the Phantom Blooper. I want to see the Phantom Blooper's black bone face.

My head bumps on a rock and I drop my M-79.

While my mind drowns in a red and black river, the Phantom Blooper is dragging my body off into the jungle to bury me alive in a Viet Cong tunnel as a wire-strapped fetus stuffed forever into a damp silent wall hundreds of feet beneath the impenetrable rain forest.

I can smell the moist black stink of jungle and I think, halfheartedly, So this is dying, it don't mean nothing, not even.

Suddenly the darkness is cold, solid, and total.

I see a floating light. But I am a United States grunt and I know that what I am seeing is a false light, a phosphorescent glow imprinted upon the jungle floor by the decayed remains of some animal that has died there.

In the glow of the false light I can see where I've been hit. My naked shoulder looks like an old piece of saddle leather after a maniac has worked it over good with an ice pick. The skin is hard, dry, yellow-brown, and

stretched too tight. In the center of the ice-pick holes is one big hole, angry red and moist.

As my eyes focus I can see that deep down in the bottom of some of the little holes are hard brown eggs. My shoulder is hot and itchy. I can't stand it anymore. I scratch hard, digging into brittle flesh with dirty fingernails, exposing the tunnel system constructed under my skin by Viet Cong worms.

Maggots come out of the holes. Maggots as white as egg flesh crawl out of the holes. Blind worms with shiny brown heads burrow beneath the thin yellow surface of my skin. Maggots crawl out of my skin through the tunnels they have made. Maggots pour out of the holes by the hundreds, wiggling wildly and squirming.

The jungle gets lighter and lighter and then brighter and brighter until the jungle is as lit up as a nighttime carnival. Every tree trunk and every plant and every leafy vine begins to radiate a strange green-yellow phosphorescent light.

Elephant grass and creepers and each leaf and gnarled root and even the interlocking triple-canopy roof of the jungle glows with light. All around me are living jungle plants full of a perfect wondrous green, and I am bathed in a warm green light of blinding intensity and everywhere I look I see jungle vines and ancient trees with light glowing deep down inside them and I surrender to the hypnotic enchantment of the world of green light and the Phantom Blooper drags me deeper and deeper into a vast and beautiful forest of green neon bamboo.

The Phantom Blooper laughs.

I laugh too.

Travels With Charlie

The man who fights too long against dragons becomes a dragon himself.

--Nietzsche

There is only one sin and that is cowardice.

--Nietzsche

The Viet Cong schoolhouse is a spacious building of handmade yellow bricks and looks like a sunny resort villa in a Tahitian paradise. The roof is red tile. There's a small courtyard off to one side where French colonial officials used to sit and drink fancy drinks and tell jokes beneath canvas canopies.

Today the courtyard is full of laughing children taking their places on reed sleeping mats, which they unroll in perfectly aligned rows along the clean-swept classroom area. The classroom area faces a wall covered by purple bougainvillea and is shaded by a coconut palm.

Kieu Chi Song and I are laying bricks. Song is the Viet Cong schoolteacher for the village of Hoa Binh, a Viet Cong village somewhere west of Khe Sanh, near the Laotian border. Song and I got up at dawn to repair a big bite that an artillery shell took out of the low whitewashed wall that encloses the courtyard.

Enemy cannons at the Rockpile and Camp Carroll crank out fire missions twenty-four hours a day. Three or four times each week big shells pass over our village on their way to hit Viet Cong positions pinpointed by forward observers, Bird Dog spotter planes or Force Recon inserts. One shell in a hundred is a dud. One shell in fifty is a short round. Sometimes short rounds kill Vietnamese civilians in the occupied zones. Sometimes short rounds fall on enemy positions and kill American Marines. This short round took a bit out of our wall.

Song stands on the other side of the wall and mixes cement as I life another broken brick.

The brick is heavy and red inside and still cold from the night. It has been broken before and has been repainted many times.

After spreading a layer of cement, Song puts down her wooden trowel and helps me position the brick. Song is careful not to get any cement on her dress. She is wearing a black silk Ao Dai which she has hand-swen with

big yellow chrysanthemums. Song has coal-black eyes, high cheekbones, dark eyelashes, perfect white teeth, and shiny black hair. Her hair hangs down her back all the way to her waist.

Song looks at me and smiles. "Bao Chi, my brother, you mend this wall without revolutionary enthusiasm."

I shrug. "Bad night."

"Bao Chi, I think that you miss your home village of Alabama very much."

I pick up another brick. "Yes," I say. You cannot tell a beautiful woman that the reason you can't sleep is because you sometimes still get the Hershey squirts, even though you've been a prisoner of war for over a year and have consumed more than your share of Viet Cong chow.

"Sometimes I can't sleep. I sit up all night down by the river and I think about my family."

"Will you fight again with the Black Rifles?"

I pat the brick down until it settles. "I can't fight against the people. Not again." I lie. "This village is my home now."

Song smiles. "Will you be the giant student today?"

I say, "Yes, my sister."

I hop over the wall and Song and I join the students in the courtyard. The children are all in their proper places on their mats, talking and playing. As Song and I come out of the schoolhouse with armloads of books, the kids stop horsing around and giggling and sit up straight and silent like little soldiers.

Song and Le Thi, her teacher's pet, pass out the books while I go back into the schoolhouse to get the notebooks and pencils hidden in the wall. High on the wall hangs a framed photograph of Ho Chi Minh and a flag. The flag is half red and half blue, with a big yellow star in the center.

As I distribute notebooks and pencils to the students one little girl stares at me with terror in her eyes and starts crying. The little girl runs to Song for protection. Song hugs the little girl, dries her tears, kisses her.

This little girl is new to the school, another refugee from the occupied zones. The mothers of Viet Nam tell their children, "Be good or the Black Rifles will get you." The Black Rifles--the Marines, long-nosed white foreigners--like me.

After Song has comforted the girl and talked softly to her the little girl squats down, but watches me, sad-eyed and silent. I'd make a funny face at her and try to make her laugh, but I don't want to scare her.

Song says to the class in English: "This man is our friend. Do you remember? His name is Bao Chi. Why is he here? Does anyone know the answer?"

A boy raises his hand. He is all smiles, the class clown. His head is clean-shaven except for a small topknot of hair. In his raised hand he's holding a small aluminum airplane, a MIG

with red stars on its wings.

Song says, "Yes, Tran."

Tran speaks not to Song but turns and plays his act to the class. "Bao Chi orders us speaking big Amercan states English." He grins, his own best audience.

Song nods, smiling. "Bao Chi helps us speak good English."

Song raises her hand and the whole class repeats back in unison: "Bao Chi helps us speak good English."

Song says, "In our country of golden-skinned people live twenty million Vietnamese. Ten percent have been killed fighting for freedom. Two million of our families and neighbors are dead. In the U.S. live two hundred million Americans. If ten percent of the American people are killed by the brave fighters of the liberation forces, how many Americans will die?"

A little girl with pigtails raises her hand. The little girl has chubby cheeks and is missing two of her baby teeth.

Song says, "Yes, Le Thi. Do you know the answer?"

Le Thi blushes. "Twenty million Americans will die," she says. Then in Vietnamese: "I am proud of our people."

Song says, "Thank you, Le Thi. Now, in a battle the gallant Front fighters defeated the American imperialists and their mercenary puppet armymen. Eight hundred enemies were killed. One-fourth of the killed enemies were mercenary puppet armymen and the others were American imperialists. How many American imperialists were killed in the battle?"

One hand goes up.

Song says, "Le Thi."

Le Thi says, "Six hundred imperialists were killed."

Song laughs. "You are very good today, Le Thi."

Le Thi giggles. Blushing, she says, "Yes, I am."

After class Song changes clothes and we lead the class to the rice fields. We all pitch in to help with the harvest.

We cut rice under the hot hammers of the sun all day, every man, woman, and child in the village.

At the end of the long day of cutting rice stalks, Song and I run barefoot along the paddy dike, playing tag. It is important that we get home before twilight so that the paths can be used by the spirits of the ancestors in their daily stroll through the village.

We run past a water buffalo wallowing in a pool of mud. The water bo is really enjoying himself.

We hear the sound of the pounding of rice. We see a woman bathing a baby in a well water bucket. As we pass by, a little boy pisses from a thatch doorway into a mudhole.

The sun is a smudge of orange behind the treeline as the people of the village come in from the fields. The men and women who fish the river are pulling their boats out of the water.

Between the boats, black nets are slung on the sand.

The riverbank is lined with tall coconut palms and clumps of bamboo and a few jackfruit trees and flame trees. Palm fronds, nudge by the wind, scrape together softly.

The older women are down in the river, knee-deep in the brown water, slapping laundry on the partly submerged washing rock and rinsing in the swift current.

Life in the Liberated Zone: In the center of the village a dozen little black pigs grunt and paw at the roots of a giant banana tree. The only machine in the village is wedged up against the trunk of the banana tree: the rusted hulk of an old French armored car.

There is no electricity in the village, no billboards, no plumbing, no telephone poles, no restaurants, no ice, no ice cream, no television, no freeways, no pickup trucks, no frozen pizza.

The hooches of the village blend into the brown and green landscape so naturally that they seem to have grown right up out of the soil like large square plants.

When I first came to the village over a year ago I said to myself: These are not reservation Indians. These Viet Cong people are not Asian mutants

like the Vietnamese I saw as a Marine, not those sad, pathetic people with a cloned culture and no self-respect, greedy and corrupt, ragged shameless beggars and whores--Tijuana Mexicans. These Viet Cong people are an entirely different race. They are proud, gentle, fearless, ruthless, and painfully polite.

When I woke up that first day I expected a bucktoothed Jap officer wearing bifocals with lenses thicker than Coke bottle glass, a samurai sword in one hand and a bouquet of burning bamboo shoots in the other. But nobody jammed bamboo shoots under my fingernails.

As Song explained, "We do not torture. We criticize."

Centuries of starvation-level poverty and endless war have not made the Vietnamese bitter or without mercy. Their culture is old and was here before the war.

A year ago I looked out of the window of the Woodcutter's hooch and saw a troop of little kids with bamboo guns trying to shoot down a toy bamboo airplane hanging from a tree limb.

"Bat ong my! Bat ong my!" the kids were chanting: "They've caught an American!"

Of course, back then, I could only speak pidgin Vietnamese, so I figured that they were saying something like, "Burn the infidel!"

When Song pushed me back on the sleeping mat and wiped my sweaty face with a damp cloth I blurted out, "Bao Chi, Bao Chi, Bao Chi!" And I added: "I'm not John Wayne, I just eat the cookies!"

The Marine Corps sent me to Viet Nam as a Marine Corps Combat Correspondent. The was before I pissed off a lifer Major in Hue City and got myself shitcanned to the grunts.

Correspondents wore Bao Chi patches on our jungle utility jackets and we always said that if we were ever captured we would yell "Bao Chi"--newspaper reporter. Then the NVA gooks would think we were bigshot civillian news reporters from New York City and wouldn't shoot us in the back of the head.

Of course, the Woodcutter knew who I was, because it was the Woodcutter who found me unconscious by the riverbank a mile from the village and carried me home on his back one cold black night, over a year ago.

Nobody knows how I came to be by the riverbank.

For over a year the Woodcutter has been studying me. For over a year the Viet Cong have been trying to convert me to their cause. For over a year I've been pretending that I am being converted.

For the first few months, I'm told, I was a catatonic, a big white zombie. I could walk, but I couldn't talk. They made me wear leg irons. I came out of it while rumping rice to distribute to North Vietnamese soldiers coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The personnel for our rice run resupply detail were mostly children. The children were all wearing thick flak vests made from woven bamboo. The Phantoms came in, laying snake eyes and nape, and I saw kids dying.

I saved a lot of kids that day, with crude tourniquets and Boy Scout first aid.

One of the kids was Johnny Be Cool, the Woodcutter's adopted son.

After that, the Woodcutter removed my legs irons. He appeared before the village council and argued that if I ever tried to escape from the village he gave his word to track me down and bring me back. For my own good, actually. In the jungle, without food or weapons, I'd die.

The Woodcutter was on target and firing for effect. I'll never escape from Hoa Binh until the Viet Cong trust me enough to allow me to go on a combat mission. Until then, I must wait patiently and pretend to be a genuine defector or they will ship my scrawny ass nonstop to a broom closet in the Hanoi Hilton. If I've learned anything from these people, it is the power of patience. Escape will take time because my conversion must appear gradual and sincere.

There are no fools in this village.

The walls of the Woodcutter's hooch are woven mats held in place by vertical bamboo slats.

The roof is thatched with split-leaf palm fronds. The floor is beaten earth.

As Song and I enter the Woodcutter's hooch the sky is purple behind black mountains.

Macaws the color of rainbows are having noisy debates in the shadows. The air is sweet with night orchids and with the wet soil odors of tropical jungle.

While Song washes her hands in an earthenware jug I step out back to a pile of chopped firewood stacked as high as my chin.

I crook my arm and load up, careful not to disturb the Woodcutter's two special pieces of firewood. Both pieces of firewood look ordinary enough but have been hollowed out. Inside one is a Swedish-K submachien gun. But no shells. I haven't been able to find the Woodcutter's hiding place for the ammo. In the second piece of special firewood is an old Playboy magazine, wrapped in plastic.

As I unload the firewood by the hearth, Song is pouring rice from a cloth sack into a black kettle over the fireplace.

While the rice boils, Song makes tea. I watch her. I watch her every day. Watching Song make tea makes me feel peaceful.

In a battered China teapot with a wire handle, the tea boils.

Song and I huddle together in the pale yellow light of a kerosene lantern. Song reads aloud to me from a crumbling paperback book stenciled FREEDOM HILL USO LIBRARY. The book is The Old Man and the Sea, by Ernest Hemingway. Song reads slowly, carefully.

When she makes a mistake in pronouncing a word I stop her and say the word. She repeats the word back to me until she has it right, then goes on reading.

Song is a few years older than I am and is very smart. She is a graduate of the University of Hue and of the Sorbonne in Paris, France, where tigers are displayed in iron cages like the Woodcutter when he was a prisoner of the French. She was ordered to go to school in Paris by Tiger Eye, the Commander of the Western Region, a great Viet Cong hero. Her expenses at the Sorbonne were paid by the National Liberation Front.

When I first came to the village, Song's English was okay, and her accent was French. Now her English is better, but her accent is pure Alabama white trash.

Song learned pidgin English while working as a hooch maid at the Marine base at Phu Bai.

During the day she washed laundry. At night she was a joy-woman and got gang-banged in the bunker by horny teenaged killers. She also was a serving officer in the Viet Cong intelligence unit. As the punchline to an old Marine joke goes, the woman was holding down three jobs.

The Vietnamese culture and Communist doctrine are so strict that the people in this village make the Puritans look like party animals. There is a proverb: Chastity is worth one thousand gold coins. Everyone in the village

knows that the Deputy Commander of the village Self-Defense Militia worked as a whore to defend her people, and to every person in the village Song is a virgin.

Song motions for me to drink my tea. I nod, but do not drink. I wait for her to invite me a second time. She motions again. This time I pick up my cup and drink. Song smiles, pleased that, finally, I am acquiring some manners.

This is my favorite part of the day. Song sits next to me, combing her shimmering black hair with her only possession of value--her mother's ivory comb. "I am so proud of the school, Bao Chi Anh, Bao Chi, my brother. Whan I was a child our school was in the forests high in the mountains. We were soldiers. We did not even have books."

"It must make you happy to be a teacher instead of a soldier," I say. "Soldiers destroy, teachers build."

Song looks at me, surprised. "But I am a soldier at the school, Bao Chi. The sword is my child. The gun is my husband. I will never release the gun until we drive away the invaders and save the people, if it takes all my life. The puppets in Saigon want to put us into barbed-wire cities and make us into beggars. We choose to walk through the gates of blood, to fight with the resistance. We fight to stay on the land where we can work and be free and have dignity. I will fight forever for the dignity of my people."

Song picks up the paperback Hemingway book. "Until Gia Phong, liberation, the children must be made strong with books, strong and beautiful like tigers in the jungle. Future generations must be given large wings with which to fly into the future."

Song looks up at me with tears glittering in her dark eyelashes. "Bao Chi, I am so sorry that the war has killed your family by taking them away from you."

I don't know what to say.

"My first memory," Song says, "is of my mother smiling at me and then leaning her rifle against a coconut tree. Uncle says that my mother would nurse me in the dark before going off to ambush French soldiers. One night they killed her."

Song reaches out and takes my hand. "When I was eight years old the steel crows came. The ground bounced up and down and then my father and my little brother Chanh were killed. I am so proud of my family."

Song looks into my eyes, holding on to my hand with a fierce intensity. She says, "We stand on oppostie banks of the river, our tears mingling, Bao Chi, my brother, but you must never think that you are alone. We are your family now." She smiles through her tears. "In hell, people starve because their hands are chained to six-foot chopsticks, too long to bring rice to their mouths. Heaven is the same, only there people feed each other."

When I first came to Hoa Binh, I called Song "Fish Breath." She called me "Vat luy," which means "Angry Fortress."

I kiss Song's forehead quickly and turn away. "Thank you," I say. Then I say in Vietnamese:

"You've saved my life here, Song. I was a dying man when I came here. The spirit hardens in war, and the body is nothing without courage. You've been very patient with me."

Song's voice is lighter when she says, "Then you will leave the bad road you are on, my brother?"

I say, "Yes, my sister."

Song kisses me on the cheek, stands up, and goes across the room to her sleeping mat. She sits down, removes an oil-cloth from her tiny antique typewriter, rolls in a gray sheet of paper.

She types in French, writing her Viet Cong war novel, which she calls Days without Sunlight, Nights without Fire.

I watch her in silence. After a few minutes she stops typing and smiles at me. "Someday, Bao Chi, our hearts will burst into flame and we will become strong and beautiful like tigers in the jungle. Then, together, we will beat the big drums of propaganda. We will shake the brass and steel of the White House."

Johnny Be Cool comes in, carrying his shoeshine kit, and he is in a bad mood. Johnny Be Cool is about ten years old, lean, tall for his age, a half-breed black kid with the walk, talk, and bearing of a deposed prince.

Johnny Be Cool does not greet us, but goes directly to his corner of the hooch and lies down on his sleeping mat. In a one-room hooch privacy is at a premium, so Song and I do not question Johnny Be Cool. Song types her novel and I watch her work.

There's a clunk out back in the woodpile. We know that it's only the Woodcutter unstrapping his harness from his back and dropping what sounds like half a ton of cut wood.

We line up in the center of the room, me, Song, and Johnny Be Cool.

The Woodcutter comes in and we bow.

Siletnly, the Woodcutter bows. Then he leans his ax, his rifle, and his bamboo walking stick against the fireplace, sits down, and waits for his supper. The Woodcutter is a funny little old man with a black turban on his head, a white wisp of beard, a twinkle in his eye, and a stainless steel backbone.

"Ong an com chua?" asks the Woodcutter as he does every day--"Have you eaten yet?"

"No, Honorable Uncle," says Song, as she says every day. "Of course not."

Johnny Be Cool is first to the table. Food is his answer to every problem in life.

The Woodcutter and I sit down at the Western-style table of polished bamboo, on bamboo benches.

Song dishes out boiled rice and big red shrimp. She gives me the teapot and I pour hot green tea into bamboo cups.

After Song sits down, the Woodcutter bows his head and says, "Cach mang muon Nam"--

"Long live the revolution."

Song, Johnny Be Cool, and I say in unison: "Cach mang muon Nam."

We wait until the Woodcutter picks up his chopsticks, brings his bowl up close to his mouth, and starts to eat. Only then do Song and Johnny Be Cool pick up their chopsticks. I pick up my white plastic spoon.

The Woodcutter stops chewing, then says, right on cue, "The rice is burned again, niece."

As she does every day, Song says solemnly, "I'm sorry, Uncle. The spirit of the kitchen must be angry."

The Woodcutter grunt and resumes eating. "Yes, that must be what it is."

Song giggles, leans over, hugs the Woodcutter, and kisses him, saying, "Misfortune hones us into jade."

The Woodcutter says to me in Vietnamese, "Bao Chi, did you perform your work at the harvest today with revolutionary enthusiasm?" The Woodcutter speaks English well enough, but has always refused to speak a single word of English to me.

I speak basic Vietnamese now, so I reply in English: "I am trying to improve my revolutionary enthusiasm, most honored sir."

The Woodcutter grunts, says to Johnny Be Cool, "How much did you earn today?"

Johnny Be Cool looks at his food. He's an orphan that the Woodcutter press-ganged into the family by force. He's a shoeshine boy for the Green Berets who operate high in the mountains and he's a Viet Cong spy. He can't sign his name--Song has had no luck at all trying to get him to go to school--but he knows the latest black-market rates down the last dong, frac, and dollar.

On his head Johnny Be Cool wears a torn and faded Marine Corps utility cover with a black eagle, globe, and anchor stenciled on the front. He does not look Vietnamese. The only thing Vietnamese about Johnny Be Cool is his language. All day long he forces American soldiers to submit to shoeshines and questions every black Marine he can find, telling them that his father's name is Lance Corporal John Henry, a steel drivin' man, and asking them if they know how to find his father's village of Chicago.

Johnny Be Cool says to the Woodcutter in English: "Be cool, man. Be loose."

Song says softly, "Newy Bac Viet?"--"Are you Vietnamese?"

Johnny Be Cool shrugs, nods, keeps his eyes on his half-eaten rice. He swats away a black blowfly. Very often children ask Johnny Be Cool why he, a black foreigner, speaks Vietnamese. "Hey, don't sweat it, mama. Be cool. Be cool. What it is."

I say, "Want to play baseball after dinner?"

Johnny Be Cool shrugs. "Later for that. Cut me some slack, Jack. Let's chow down. Be cool."

After the meal the Woodcutter puts a pinch of black opium from Laos into the bowl of his long bamboo water pipe. He rotates the opium over a candle flame until it is a big black bubble. Soon he is puffing away happily, making sucking sounds with the pipe and then exhaling sweet acrid smoke.

Song says to the Woodcutter, "Venerable Uncle, how was your day?"

Without hesitation the Woodcutter begins to complain in detail about how he is forced to climb higher and higher into the Dong Tri Mountains to find trees that are not so full of shrapnel that they ruin his ax.

Every day, the Woodcutter says, another whole forest dies from the smoke sprayed by American pirate planes. The smoke kills every tree, every vien. Birds fall out of the trees and cover the ground. Fish in the mountain streams float belly up. The future of the profession of woodcutting is very uncertain.

As Song and I clear the table, Song slips Johnny Be Cool some strips of sugar cane and hugs him. He goes outside to feed his water buffalo.

The Woodcutter and I set up the Ping-Pong table and play a few fast games by kerosene light.

As we play, the Woodcutter chain-smokes Salems and tells me, once again, about La Sale guerre--the "dirty war" against the French--about the mountain fighters who never ate in a clean hut in their whole lives, about his landlord who taxed the people even for leaves collected in the forest, about how as a young man he was press-ganged into the Viet Minh.

More and more, the Woodcutter seems to be living in the past; his mind is always back in the old days when he was young and hungry and hunted by the French. "Against the great wealth and firepower of the French we had only our convictions."

When the Americans first came to Hoa Binh the Woodcutter was seventy years old and had never been more than fifty miles from the village. The first time a helicopter landed in the village the people thought it was a big metal bird. They gathered around the chopper and patted it and tried to feed it yams.

But the Woodcutter was afraid of the strange invader and fired a crossbow at it. For this crime, puppet troops bruned the village of Hoa Binh to the ground and the Woodcutter was locked up in prison for six years.

In prison, the Woodcutter heard the word "Communism" for the first time. His puppet jailors talked about Communism so much that, by the time of his release, he was thoroughly converted.

The Woodcutter says, remembering: "Even in prison we were more free than our jailers."

It's the Woodcutter's outstanding war record that has kept me in this village and out of the Hanoi Hilton. It was a very hot day a little over a year ago when the village council, presided over by the Woodcutter as First Notable, met to decide my fate.

Ba Can Bo, the lady Front cadre, a stern by-the-book lifer, demanded that I be sent--in chains--straight to Hanoi. She was seconded by Battle Mouth, her pompous junior cadre.

Battle Mouth called me a Binh Van and a "long-nosed surrenderer" and some other things I didn't understand. He said I should be shot on the spot. Then he drew his revolver, put the barrel against my neck, and volunteered to do the job himself.

The Woodcutter laughed and called Battle Mouth a "red-tape soldier." and a "revolutionary-come- lately" and the village elders laughed.

I stood on front of a long canopy-shaded table, facing the village elders, while Ba Can Bo aimed a finger at my head and proclaimed her authority over my bandaged carcass in the name of the National Liberation Front. She said a lot of stuff about running dog imperialists and said I was one. I couldn't speak much Vietnamese back then, so I probably missed a lot of Ba Can Bo's material. It was easy to see that the village elders were buying her case against me.

As Ba Can Bo continued to rant and rave, the Woodcutter interrupted her by pounding the tabletop with his old Viet Minh hero of the Revolution medal, which looked like a frontier marshal's badge. Ba Can Bo tried to go on with her patriotic speech, but the Woodcutter persisted. The Woodcutter pounded his medal hard on the table like a judge's gavel and when Ba Can Bo tried talking louder he pounded harder.

The Woodcutter insisted that I was his prisoner, his own persoanl prisoner, and he promised the village elders that he would be responsible for me. "To win many battles," he said, "we must see into the hearts of our enemy. Why do the Americans fight? The Amercians are a mystery to us. They are phantoms without faces. This Black Rifle, this Marine, has secrets that I would know."

When Ba Can Bo objected, the Woodcutter cut her short by saying, not quite shouting, "Phep vua thua le lang." Then, suddenly, the Woodcutter repeated, fiercely, like John Brown at Harper's Ferry or like Moses throwing down the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the ancient Vietnamese proverb, "Phep vua thua le lang"--"The laws of the emperor stop at the village gate!"

The Woodcutter and I play cutthroat Ping-Pong. He slashes at the flying white ball and tries to drive it into my brain. I hack at the incoming ball

clumsily, always off balance, always on the defensive.

Once, a long time ago, I jokingly suggested that I might try to escape. The Woodcutter just about did himself an injury, he was laughing so hard. The Woodcutter stands less than five feet tall. His shoulders are slightly hunched from time and a life of hard labor. His chest is bony and his legs are scarred and sturdy. His graying hair is receding from a high, broad forehead. Piercing black eyes are set in deep over high cheekbones. The Woodcutter's face is a shrewd and open face with a wispy white chin beard, and his laughter shows strong white teeth.

The Woodcutter loves to tell war stories about his exploits against the French, but the one gung ho sea story that the Woodcutter never tells is about how he won his medal and became a Hero of the Revolution.

One hot day, back about the time I was busy being born, a big green French armored car attacked the village. The armored car was destroying the rice crop and was killing the people.

The village Self-Defense Militia had two Chinese mortar shells, but no mortar. And there were no grenades, because the people had not yet learned how to make grenades.

The Woodcutter filled a gourd with kerosene from lamps, and added a strip of oilcloth to make the gourd into a primitive Molotov cocktail.

As the Woodcutter attacked, pausing to dip the oilcloth into a cooking fire, the armored car was moving past the giant banana tree and was maching-gunning everything that moved. The French gunners were astounded to see a man in a loincloth charging across the village common, gourd in hand. They fired. The Woodcutter was hit. Once. Twice. Again. And then a fourth time.

The French gunners stared in disbelief at this supernatural being. He threw the gourd. They tried to abandon their vehicle. But the gourd exploded and the French soldiers died in fire, screaming.

Now the villagers called the Woodcutter Bac Kien--"Uncle Fire Ant." The Woodcutter was the fire ant that bit the French so painfully that the French were forced to take their foot off of the village.

The big iron war machine that was killed by a barefoot peasant still sits under the giant banana tree, rusty brown now and with a full crew of lizards.

The Woodcutter gets tired of humiliating me at Ping-Pong and has retold all of his favorite parables and proverbs and tiger jokes--The tiger is more honest than man, because a tiger wears his stripes on the outside, the United States is a paper tiger powered by gasoline.

Americans are ferocious tigers but they are helpless against determination, America is on the back of a tiger and is afraid to dismount, in the United States they have killed all of the tigers and the rabbits are in charge.

I go outside to find Johnny Be Cool.

Johnny Be Cool is in the water buffalo's bunker, feeding his prive possession. He's constatnly washing the bo, feeding it, pampering it.

By village standards Johnny Be Cool is a man of means. He bought the water bo with his own money, earned as a shoeshine boy while on his spying missions, and he rents out the lumbering monster to farmers who are too poor to own a buffalo. Johnny Be Cool saves every piaster. Someday he will take a trip to America to find his father, John Henry, that steel drivin' man.

Johnny Be Cool watches the water buffalo eat. As the bo crunches his food lazily, Johnny Be Cool offers me a strip of sugar cane.

Johnny Be Cool and I sit together in the moonlight, sucking noisily on our sugar cane.

Johnny Be Cool encourages the water buffalo to continue eating by taking out a small bamboo flute and playing a tune, close to the water bo's ear.

The only other sound is the soft, rhythmic tapping of Song's typewriter.

At dawn the next morning, Song, Johnny Be Cool, and I join everyone in the village for the harvest in the rice fields.

When I was a kid in Alabama I could drag a nine-foot gunnysack from dawn to dusk, picking cotton to earn a little extra money to throw away on suckers' games at the county fair.

The first thing you learn about harvesting rice, if you have ever picked cotton, is that the pain hits you in exactly the same spot in the small of your back. After ten hours in the sun my revolutionary enthusiasm is not what it should be. I've gone soft since I gave up farming and started fighting in a war.

It does feel good to get my hands into some dirt, even if it is mud.

I kick some water at a duck as it paddles by and I think about the truth in Uncle Ho's slogan,

"Rice fields are battlefields." Nobody ever said that back in Alabama, but somebody should have said it, because we had the same war, grow to eat, eat to live.

In this world without supermarkets farmers are Asian Minuteman, a hoe in one hand and a rifle in the other, and rice is life itself, god's gemstone, and hunger in the rice fields is a military defeat. Each planting season is a new campaign in the war that never ends, the war of water, weather, and soil, the life-and-death struggle some men wage against stump roots.

The Woodcutter grunts his disapproval of my harvesting technique, steps in close behind me, grabs my wrist roughly. He demonstrates the proper way to hold the Luoi hai, a rice sickle with a curving blade, and how to grasp a rice-heavy bunch of stalks, how to slice the bunch at the base under the water, quickly, but smooth and sure so that none of the dull gold rice kernels shake loose. A grain of rice is a drop of blood.

Trying to look like I'm squared away, I cut a few more bunches, wading knee-deep in muddy water, rice-stalk stubble pricking my naked feet.

The Woodcutter watches me closely, then says, "Someday, Bao Chi, you will hear the rice growing. Someday. Maybe." With a critical grunt, he climbs up onto the paddy dike and walks away.

Rice sickles flash up and down, glinting in the sun. It's like being inside a vast machine that hums and crunches. Each harvester piles cut stalks into a crooked arm. When the bunch is big enough it is tied with twine and stacked on the foot-worn paddy dike, where they are picked up by the village children and carried to thrashers who beat the rice stalks by hand to remove the grains. The grains are rolled to remove the husks and then tossed into the air on flat rattan baskets until the thin husks are blown away by the wind.

The people of Hoa Binh, peasants up to their knees in paddy muck, work in the yellow furnace of the sun all day, dawn to dusk, and they talk, and laugh. Sometimes they sing.

Men, women, and children work in harmony with Xa, the land, because the pull of the land is strong. Back in the World, farmers are becoming almost as rare as cowboys and Americans no longer respect the land or

people who work the land. In Hoa Binh the ancient bond of centuries, soil, and farmers is still strong.

A courier kid runs along the paddy dike, a little boy in a faded yellow T-shirt that says ELVIS

THE KING. He hands a tiny envelope to the Woodcutter.

The Woodcutter thanks the young courier, opens the envelope, nods approval, scribbles a brief reply on the back of the envelope with a ballpoint pen, then hands the little envelope back to the boy.

The boy salutes, double-times back down the paddy dike.

The courier kids come to the Woodcutter like that all day, every hour or so.

Three or four times each day artillery shells crash though the air over our heads and chug away to hit some target in the mountains. Except for the odd short round, we ingore the shells.

Several times each day we hear the sounds of approaching helicopters. We ingore the helicopters as long as they don't come in groups and don't come in too close or too fast.

Nothing freezes teh blood faster than the black shadows of these airborned machines. If we run, we're VC, and they shoot us. If we stand still, we are well-disciplined VC, so they shoot us anyway.

But if it's an attack and the helicopters are going to land they come lick locusts. If a single chopper landed here alone, the people of the village would not try to feed it yams.

A hundred angry villagers would hang as dead weight from the slender rotor blades until the rotor blades were twisted, bent, and broken. They would hack through the fragile aluminum fuselage with wooden hoes and rakes. The door gunner would be slashed without mercy by a flailing wall of rice knvies and machetes. With bare hands the people of the village would rip apart the smashes Plexiglas bubble and then the pilot's helmet would be pounded and stabbed and battered with stones and farm implements until the dark green sun visor over the pilot's face turned black with blood.

At noon we eat lunch from wicker baskets brought out from the village by pretty teenaged girls, the Phuong twins, White Rose and Yellow Rose.

Eating the fist and rice, I think about how my dad and I, after a long morning of plowing with a mean mule, used to eat lunches of cornbread,

mayonnaise and tomato sandwiches, poke salad in a brown paper sack, and well water in Mason jars.

As the Woodcutter drinks pickle juice from a gourd dipper like the gourd dippers we used on the farm when I was a boy, the Woodcutter's hands are like my father's hands, callused and scarred, but hands that can feel the life in good soil and the solid strength in a block of wood.

One of the Phuong twins gives me a plugged coconut. Her smile revelas dimples that would melt an asbestos brick. Both of the Phuong twins have round, happy faces, with flawless complexions, black hair braided into pigtails, and hair-trigger giggles. Today they're both wearing black pajama trousers and matching pink shirts.

I lift the coconut between raw, blistered hands. I drink the delicious cocnut milk in long swallows, chugging the cool, sweet liquid.

The Phuong twins move down the paddy dike and give coconuts to the Nguyen brothers, Mot, Hai, and Ba. There are a lot of blushes and giggles from the Phuong twins and a lot of good-natured catcalls from the villagers. The village matchmakers have been working overtime to solve this critical problem in mathematics: how to divide three Nguyen brothers into two Phuong twins.

I wipe sweat from my face with somebody's Liberation Front bandana. I climb up into the paddy dike and lie down. My back is throbbing with pain. I concentrate. I ignore the pain.

On Parris Island, during Marine Corps recruit training, Gunny Gerheim, our Senior Drill Instructor, taught us that pain is only an illusion and exists only in the mind.

Concentrating, I can hear Sergeant Gerheim's booming voice: "Fall into the squad bay, herd.

Gent inside! Get inside! You pinheaded no-brained foreskin-chewing pogey bait maggots, you are lower than worm life! All right, ladies, right shoulder locker box. Do it now! And repeat after me: 'We're a bunch of girls, and we can't march.'"

I miss Parris Island. Parris Island was a picnic.

As I sit up and swallow my last bite of fish and squash, a muffled drone on the horizon turns into a Bird Dog spotter plane. A small olive-drab Cessna sputters in slow motion above the rice fields, unarmed, just one for a little noontime VR--Visual Reconnaissance.

Loudspeakers on the plane play Buddhist funeral music wile a Kit Carson Scout who has Chieu Hoi'd reads invitations to surrender and itemizes the many bennies available for Viet Cong troopers who defect over to the American side of the bamboo curtain.

The villagers wave at the plane in a friendly way, and they jokes: "Ban May Bay giac My"--

"We must shoot down all of the American pirate planes." Everybody laughs, waving harder.

I wave too, and I hunch down beneath my white conical rice-paper hat as I squat on the paddy dike.

Johnny Be Cool stands on the back of his water buffalo, waving.

Today, instead of buzzing along harmlessly until it's out of sight, the Bird Dog swings around and makes another pass, coming in unusually low, rocking its wings to wave at the villagers, who wave back and cheer, and laugh, because everybody knows that the Phuong twins, the pretty girls who brought us lunch, are at this moment in a camoflaged postition in the treeline, taking care of business.

The Phuong twins track the Bird Dog through the sights of a 12.7-milimeter antiaircraft gun until it is out of sight.

The day returns to its usual back-breaking routine until late in the afternoon, when someone finds an unexploded shell. There is some minor excitement as Commander Be Dan arrives with four Chien Si, Front fighters from the village Self-Defense Milita.

The Chien Si are skinny teenaged boys wearing dark green shorts, short-sleeved khaki shirts, and rubber sandals cut from truck tires. The fighters are armed with AK-47 assault rifles slung over their backs.

Commander Be Dan and the Woodcutter have a brief but noisy debate concerning the risk of removing the shell. It could be cut opne and the explosives inside used to make boody traps and hand grenades.

Commander Be Dan is short and stocky, like a Korean Marine. He's missing his left hand at the wrist. His hand was blown off when Commander Be Dan was a sapper in the Dac Cong, the Viet Cong Special Forces. He's a former heavy-hitter demoted to the minor leagues. As the Woodcutter chatters on and on and flings his arms, Commander Be Dan is silent.

Commander Be Dan never says very much; he's sort of a Viet Cong Gary Cooper.

During planting season three villagers were killed and seven injured when their plows and hoes struck unexploded bombs and shells. Even the soil that gives us life is full of death sown by the enemy.

Commander Be Dan convinces the Woodcutter that this particular shell is too dangerous to remove intact. The shell is blown in place, quickly, so that the harvest can continue.

We work on. More hours of hard, back-breaking labor. The grain is in head and ready to fall, so harvest days do not end until twilight.

Tonight is village meeting night. As we leave our partly harvest crop and walk back to the village we look forward to an entertainment.

Song and I kick aside the stubby white ghosts that are chickens pecking rice kernels off the paddy dike. Somewhere a water bo bellows mournfully, lonely for his girlfriend. Somewhere laughing children run, trying to catch firelfies.

Walking with Song, I inhale the life-giving odors of earth, sun, sweat, and animals. My back is stiff and numb, but my body feels hot and strong with the good tired feeling that comes at the end of a day of hard work, when you feel like you're earned your supper and have earned your right to a good night's sleep, because you're free, and honest, and you don't owe anybody a damned thing.

After the evening meal, still tired from our day in the fields but enjoying the relief from the tropical heat, the entire village assembles on the village common, facing the giant banana tree.

Sitting on top of the rusting wrekc of the French armored car is Bo Doi Bac Si, a North Vietnamese Army medic. This is a relief for everyone. It means that we are not going to have to suffer through another reading from Mao's Little Red Book by Ba Can Bo, our political cadre.

Bo Doi Bac Si is an ernest young man, serious about his duties, yet friendly and good-natured. He is wearing a clean khaki uniform with trousers and spit-shined black leather boots. Red collar tabs bearing a single silver star on a yellow stripe identify him as a Corporal. Attached to the front of his small khaki-colored pith helmet is a red metal star.

A pet monkey sits on Bo Doi Bas Si's shoulder, playing with the Coporal's ear. Bo Doi Bac Si found the monkey on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The monkey was dying and he nursed it back to health. He calls the monkey Trang--"Victory."

The Corporal, along with his superior, Master Sergeant Xuan, are stationed in Hoa Binh as liasisons between the Front fighters and North Vietnamese Army units that march like army ants down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and draw supplies of rice from the village of Hoa Binh.

The commanding officer of the NVA liaison detachment, Lieutenant Minh, a very popular man, was killed last month during a B-52 attack a few miles from the village. During the attack, Lieutenant Mihn jumped into a shell-hole fish pond for cover and was bitten by a deadly bamboo viper.

The title of Bo Doi Bac Si's talk is "Ho Chi Minh's Armies March by Night."

Bo Doi Bac Si opens a small pocket diary. The pages of the diary are stained. The cover is faded and torn. He turns the pages of the diary for a moment, then looks at the audience. He has happy eyes and an easy grin. He is the Audie Murphy of the NVA. When he speaks, his voice is touched with emotion: "We began our historic journey with a cheer, "Nam Tien!"--

"Let's march South!"

As Bo Doi Bac Si speaks, Song whispers a translation into my ear. She knows that my understanding of Vietnamese is sketchy and that Bo Doi Bac Si's northern speech is too fast and too heavily accented for me to understand clearly.

Before Bo Doi Bac Si can exploit the momentum of his dramatic beginning, Trang, his pet monkey, stops eating peanuts from the shell and suddenly grabs the Coporal's pith helmet and pulls it from the Corporal's head, revealing a closely cropped shock of ink-black hair.

Holding the pith helmet with both hands, Trang puts the helmet onto his own head. We all laugh, of course, but we struggle to be polite while the Corporal lunges at teh little brown monkey in a vain attempt to recover his headgear. Some of us laugh as the chattering monkey and the pith helmet disappear over the back end of the armored car. We can hear Trang screeching as he runs away.

We are quiet and respectful as Bo Doi Bac Si continues: "Before I joined the People's Army I worked as a petrol station attendant just outside of Hanoi. My father is a bricklayer and my mother works part-time as a volunteer nurse."

"On the day I left home I told my mother and father to think of me as dead, and not to be sad for me, but happy.

"In my training battalion were comrade soldiers from all over Viet Nam. We were issued uniforms, boots, pith helmets, a mosquito net, a knapsack, a rice bowl and a pair of chopsticks, and a war surplus Russian Army belt with an enameled red star on the buckle.

With so many fine things we felt like very rich men.

"We were given many pieces of paper to write on, and we complained that we were eager to fight the puppet armymen of the Saigon gangsters and wanted to win many battles agains the American imperialist aggressors, not waste time writing our names and birthdates and natal villages on endless pieces of paper.

"Our training was hard, six days a week, and our instructors were very strict. We marched in formations, ran up hills, ran down hills, crawled under barbed wire, thew hand grenades, bayoneted wicker men, and learned how to clean and fire our rifles effectively.

"I was assigned to a school and trained to doctor wounded comrade soldiers in battle.

"The day our training ended we were the happiest and proudest men on earth, with a strong fighting spirit. We felt that it was a great honor to have been selected to defend our beautiful country and our way of life.

"We rode to Tchepone on a train. Most of my comrades had never ridden on a train and we were frightened. But soon we were laughing and joking, happy that our training was over, and looking forward to a great adventure and to great victories in defense of our southern brothers, who were gallantly and steadfastly resisting the cruel domination of foreign criminals. From our train windows we could see happy children standing on thebacks of their water buffaloes, waving to us. We were their protection. We were the sons of their people, the armymen of the people, and we all understood deep down inside that our responsibilities to our people were great.

"We got off the train and climbed into big gray-green Russian trucks. The trucks had low-lamp shuttered headlights. We rode in the trucks day and night for two days. When we got off the trucks we were in a big camp with thousands and thousand of Bo Doi--comrade soldiers--just like us. We had never seen so many soldiers.

"Our commanders ordered us to take off our uniforms and put on black pajama outfits. We were instructed to say, if captured, that we were not Bo Doi, government soldiers from the North, but Chien Si, guerrilla fighters of the South from the National Liberation Front. We were not told where we were going. We did not ask.

"Each fighter was issued two grenades, one hundred bullets, a poncho, a small shovel, an assault rifle, and eight pounds of rice, which we carried inside a hammoch lined with wax paper and slung across our chests.

"We cut twigs from tree braches and tied them to our pith helmets and equipment with string.

Each fighter was assigned a heavy load of military supplies to carry on his back. I was given a knapsack containing six 61-millimeter mortar bombs.

"The night before we stared South we had a feast, spicing our rive with mushrooms and chopped fish. We even drank a few beers we'd smuggled into camp. We listened to a puppet radio station, careful not to be caught by the cadres, who were afraid we might be brainwashed by the propaganda of the Siagon gangster regime. If we were caught, our cadres would criticize us.

"My comrades and I all bought pocket diaries for recording our historic march and for writing poetry during the long march South to almost certain death. We knew that our descendans would treasure our diaries after we were killed in battle. We had no thought but that we would fight on until we were killed. We were committed to the cause of the salvation of the nation, which is very sacred.

"We carved walking sticks and inscribed them with out motto: 'Live great, die gloriously.'

"We walked for what seemed like thousands of kilometers. We saw Bo Doi battalions singing as they marched. We sang too. Up mountains, down mountains, along paths barely visible, along paved roads, through jungles that were wet, green and gloomy.

"Crossing rivers and streams was the hardest part of traveling in the jungle. Our feet were always wet and diseased. Every cut became infeced. Leeches were our constant compaions.

"Everywhere the Dan Cong Labor Brigades were working to repair the Strategic Trail, which was sometimes called the Truong Son Route. Pirate

planes bombed the trail every day, sometimes near, sometimes far away. But nothing slowed the flow of the camel bikes--

Chinese bicycles loaded with up to one thousand kilos of military supplies.

"We ate at food stations, hot rice boiled in big black iron pots. We saw hospitals, vast supply depots, and antiaircraft cannons. Thousands of workers and fighters lived all along the Strategic Trail to assist the river of People's Army battalions marching South. Food was stored in bomb craters covered with canvas.

"Casualties due to dysentery were increasing. In the second week, two fighters were killed by the bombs. Heat casualties were becoming more common--we left them behind in the underground hospitals. Some of them caught up with us later, but some died.

"I tended wounds, gave out medicine, and checked everyone's feet regularly to prevent jungle rot.

"Half of our battalion had malaria. I remember walking all day with such a high fever that while my body moved forward my mind was unconscious.

"By the third week we were seeing heavily bombed jungle and burned and blackened rain forests. Lake-bomb craters were everywhere and we saw scary places where every tree and every plant and every living thing had withered and died.

"In the fifth week, American pirate planes dropped fire from the sky and many fighters were burned alive. The air was pulled out of our lungs by the fire and I fainted. When I woke up, the trees were charred, smoking stubs, and I had burns on my arms and face and my hands.

"After two days of burying the dead, we collected out equipment and continued our march.

We walked through a beautiful forest. Upon hundreds of trees were carved thousands and thousands of names of fighters who had gone before us. After we got over the strangeness of the sight we carved our own names into trees. We were tired, but we wanted to inspire our brothers who would follow in our steps after we were sleeping honorably with our ancestors.

That day my platoon sergeant stepped into a gopher hole and broke his leg.

"In the sixth week we were being bombed every day, sometimes more than once a day. We were so tired, we almost welcomed the bomb attacks as rest breaks. The monsoon rains began to fall and we were homesick. By this time almost every man in the battalion had malaria to some degree, and many comrade soldiers had to be left behind. We were losing men every day now, to malaira, dysentery, enemy bombs, and injuries. Two fighters died from snake bites. The tigers were eating our dead. We couldn't sleep because our eyes were swollen with mosquito bites. At night we could hear comrade soldiers crying.

"There were no more food stations. We ate wild fruits, nuts and berries, even roots.

Sometimes our commanders allowed us to fish with hand grenades. Fires were forbidden, so we ate the fish raw.

"Now our food was being brought to us in small quantities by Front fighters from villages like Hoa Binh. Without this food, harvested by the people and carried on the backs of women and children through enemy lines, my comrades and I would have starved.

"Hundreds of rickety bamboo bridges spanning hundreds of foul-smelling streams began to blur into one long green and black dream. Now there was nothing to break the monotomy of the jungle except grave mounds and skeletons by the trail. We marched only by night.

During the day we slept deep in the earth in cool, damp tunnels and listened to the constant droning of bombs, cannons, and the flying war machines.

"In the seventh week we slogged through a swamp, coughing with pneumonia, sick with fever. We stumbled through a dirty gray mist, our legs black with leeches, mud sucking at our swollen and blistered feet. We saw a big complex of tree houses in the swamp, abandoned by some strange race of forgotten people.

"Our food was reduced to a handful of rice a day.

"When we finally emerged from the swamp we saw our first Truc Thang--our first helicopter.

Every fighter was camouflaged with fresh leaves and twigs. We dropped to the ground while the horrible metal dragon sat in the sky directly above us. There was a very loud noise and a big wind. Guns fired and a comrade was killed where he lay. We were afraid, but no one moved. We waited for

the order to return fire, but it never came. After a while the big machine flew away.

"In our eighth week we were met by Chien Si cadres. The cadres were southerners and had strange accents. They gave us the traditional welcoming greeting for comrade soldiers arriving in teh South, a drink from a coconut. Then they led us to a carefully concealed network of tunnels and underground bunkers.

"Underground, in the vast complex of tunnels, we cheered. We were safe. We had survived.

And, having survived, we would be able to contribute to the struggle against the enemies of the people. We asked for no greater honor. Of the two hundred fighters in our unit only eighty made it to the South. We, the survivors, greeted our southern brothers with enthusiasm.

"We were issued rations, and even some salt. Now, our journey over, we began to feel depressed. We had time to miss the comrades who had been killed or left behind. We missed our homes and our families.

"I had infected cuts all over my legs and hands. My black pajama outfit was rotting and hung in rags on my body. The climate in the South was depressingly hot.

"The earth-shaking advance of the Liberation Army was reduced to a crawl.

"But our cadre inspired us. He told us about how the first platoon of the People's Army was formed by General Giap. At eighten, General Giap was locked up in a French prison. His wife was also imprisoned, and was tortured to death.

"General Giap is only five feet tall and weighs less than one hundred pounds. But in December 1944, at age twenty-nine, he led the first platoon of the People's Army, thirty-four men and women, armed only with swords and muskets, against the French.

"The French captured General Giap's sister and cut off her head with a guillotine. General Giap and Uncle Ho lived in the high mountains for twenty years, sweating in the hot jungle, sometimes with nothing to eat but snakes and roots, but enduring without complaint, because they never doubted for a moment that the people would be victorious.

"Our cadre led us in a cheer to Uncle Ho and General Giap. Then he told us that the People's Army will advance aggressively. When we are

attacked, the enemy will meet our strong defense and our strong fighting spirit. We will never falter in our duties, because the people have given us their sacred trust, and Comrade-General Giap and Uncle Ho are depending upon us to carry out our duties cleverly.

"When we left the North we were dead men and dead men have no fear. When our cadre asked us to tell him what our duty was, we stood up. Ragged, sick, starving, the fighters of my unit stood tall and proud, and cheered with hoarse voices, and replied in chorus: 'Born in the North to die in the South, it is the duty of our generations to die for our country.'"

The voice so full of pride and sadness stops speaking. Bo Doi Bac Si gazes silently at the pages of his diary, remembering.

The people of Hoa Binh sit in respectful silence, thinking about the sacrifices and struggles of the heroic soldiers who march daily down the Strategic Trail, young soldiers of the people who are marching this very minute not ten miles away, steadfast comrades who depend upon Hoa Binh for food or they will die as surely as if hit by an American bomb.

Ba Can Bo stands up and makes an announcement. "Tomorrow we will complete the Better Water for the Village Project. Rice fields are battlefields and the people are the strongest weapon."

At dawn Song and I take our hoes and walk down to the river to take part in Ba Can Bo's Better Water for the Village Project.

We meet the Broom-Maker on the path to the river. She detours across the village common to intercept us. The Broom-Maker never misses an oppurtunity to make me feel welcome in the village.

The Broom-Maker is maybe a couple of thousand years old. She walks hunched over, a blue and white shawl over her shoulders. Her teeth are black, her gums dark red. The Broom-Maker has a serious drug-abuse problem in the area of betel-nut consumption. She is always chomping away on a cud about two-thirds the size of a tennis ball. Like a sapper probing for a land mine, the Broom-Maker pokes each foot of ground in her path with a dragon's-head walking stick carved out of teak and brought to a high polish by time.

Her bearing is a full-fledged dress parade strut and her hurried pace is the badge of her many important duties. According to Song, all of the Broom-Maker's five sons were killed in the war against the French, and three of her grandsons have died fighting the Marines at Khe Sanh. The

Broom-Maker is chairman of the Soldiers' Foster Mother Organization and holds the important office of village midwife, the only person allowed to cut the umbilical cords of newborn babies and bury them in local soil. Her husband was killed at Dien Bien Phu and her brother was once in prison with Ho Chi Minh. The Broom-Maker is the most powerful woman in Hoa Binh.

As soon as the Broom-Maker is within spitting range she fires off a flying bomb of red betel-nut juice in my general direction and follows it up with the word Phalang!--"white foreigner."

The Broom-Maker sniffs at Song and says, "Truong Thi My"--Miss America.

As the Broom-Maker marches by like Napolean at the head of his army she lashes out with the only English sentence she knows: "Get out of Viet Nam, Long Nose, or I will kill your ass."

"Yes, ma'am. Chao Ba." I say, very loud, because I know that she is deaf in one ear from a B-52 attack. I tip my rice paper hat. "You have a real nice day, now, you hear?"

Song does not wish to be impolite, but she has a hard time keeping a straight face as the Broom-Maker shakes her dragon's-head walking stick at me menacingly and repeats, "Get out of Viet Nam, Long Nose, or I will kill your ass."

Ba Can Bo's Better Water for the Village Project is so important that even the critically vital rice harvest will be delayed until after lunch.

Almost every man, woman, and child in the village has brought a digging tool. We stand in two rows six feet apart, facing each other. The lines of workers start at the rice paddies and stretch through the jungle to the river. Little kids cling to their mothers' legs. Babies are slung on their mothers' backs. Children over the age of'six hold hoes, shovels, and pickaxes.

In a gesture of cruel teasing Song and I take places in a row on opposite sides of the Broom-Maker. She scowls. Facing us in the other row are Commander Be Dan and Bo Doi Bac Si.

Walking very erect between the rows, inspecting, Ba Can Bo, the lady cadre, the National Liberation Front's political liaison with the village of Hoa Binh, looks very stern and unpleasant. She is about forty-five years old, an old maid married to her job. She is tall for a Vietnamese. She prefers

khaki trousers to shorts and wears her graying hair in a tight bun without decorative clips or ribbons. Over her shoulder hangs a blue dispatch pouch, her badge of office. On the pocket of her immaculate green shirt hangs a Ho Chi Minh of red enamel and gold.

I ask Song why everyone is so respectful to such a sour old lifer, a red-tape soldier.

Song says, "Each comrade gives what he has to give, Bao Chi. Our last cadre was a young man with a happy spirit. He was a very good man, very energetic. He told jokes, was popular with everyone. He was a good cadre. Ba Can Bo is not a warm woman, but she is a good cadre. A smile is not a brain, and a friendly handshake does not chop wood for the fire."

Ba Can Bo orders us to watch carefully for buried bombs. Then she blows a whistle and we dig. Ba Can Bo picks up a shovel and joins in.

In six hours we cut a canal one hundred yards long, four feet wide, and four feet deep. We stop digging a few yards from the river.

We eat lunch. Song has packed a picnic basket for three. Johnny Be Cool has been assigned to guard duty, so Song invites her best friend to join us.

We sit on the riverbank under the shade of a flame tree with Duong Ngoc Mai. Song tells me about her friend. Mai is eight months pregnant. She's a Fighter-Widow. Her husband was killed six months ago by the Den Sung Truongs, the Black Rifles -- the American Marines.

He was the village potter. Mai is a staff sergeant in a Viet Cong Main Force battalion, and is home on a medical furlough. For her brave deeds in battle, Mai's name has been inscribed on the roll of honor of the Dung Si Quoc My--the "heroic American killers."

Mai, the Fighter-Widow, her belly big under her black pajama blouse, talks to Song but refuses to say a single word to me. She stares at me without expression, no hatred, no recognition that I exist at all.

Swatting recklessly at the sudden attack of a dragonfly causes me to choke on my pickle juice. The dragonfly is fearlessly aggressive, but a flurry of karate chops cutting the air discourages it. Chromed in blue metal, the dragonfly buzzes away, powered by a tiny engine.

After lunch we build a fieldstone foundation for mounting the paddle wheel. Thirty people grunt and sweat and lift the big wooden wheel up and muscle it into position.

Johnny Be Cool comes in off guard duty and watches while the paddle wheel is hammered into place.

Between the paddle wheel and the river a crew of workers digs out the final few yards of earth, allowing river water to flow into the new irrigation ditch.

Commander Be Dan lifts Johnny Be Cool up onto the bicycle seat attached to the paddle wheel. The wheel is powered by bicycle pedals. Johnny Be Cool waits until Ba Can Bo gives the signal, then peddles as hard and as fast as he can.

Straining, then moving, then faster and faster, the heavy wheel turns, pushing the water forward. The broad wooden blades lift river water a bit at a time and deposit it over the paddy dike and into the next paddy.

The people cheer: "HO! HO! HO!"

Ba Can Bo leads us in a patriotic song:

We are peasants in soldier's clothing

Waging a struggle for farmers oppressed a thousand years Our suffering is the suffering of the people.

After an unusually hard day of setting up the water wheel and then going on with the harvest, we enjoy coming together after the evening meal to watch the initiation of three apprentice Viet Cong into the ranks of armed fighters.

When I was with the Marines there was a persistent myth, a story often told by some guy who'd heard it sworn to--no shit--by some other guy, about Marines finding dead Viet Cong children, chained to machine guns. The point of the story was how desperately short of recruits the enemy was, how unwilling to fight, how cruel.

Now I am the the Woodcutter's experiment, his theory that victory requires knowledge of the enemy, along with an unflinching acceptance of any unendurable truths. The Viet Cong see us more clearly than we see ourselves, but we can't see them at all.

As a Marine it took me two years in the field to stop underestimating the Viet Cong. It was just like learning about sex--everything anybody had ever told me about the subject was bullshit. I picked up the real facts on the streets.

As a Combat Correspondent I was part of the vast gray machine that does not dispense clean information. The American weakness is that we try

to rule the world with public relations, then end up believing our own con jobs. We are adrift in a mythical ship which no longer touches land.

Americans can't fight the Viet Cong because the Viet Cong are too real, too close to the earth, and through American eyes what is real can only be a shadow without substance.

Sitting with Song up front, next to the Phuong twins, suddenly I feel in control. I feel that I know who I am and I know what I'm doing. I am not a statistic. Here we are not helpless, faceless masses. There are no masses in a Viet Cong village. In our village we are not victims to forces beyond our control. We have large wings with which to fly into the future.

Commander Be Dan appears, followed by Mot, Hai, and Ba, the Nguyen brothers.

The Phuong twins are beaming, because the Phuong twins and the Nguyen brothers are all desperately and passionately in love, despite the fact that there's one too many Nguyen brothers and the perhaps more interesting fact that none of the Nguyen brothers can tell the Phuong twins apart.

The Nguyen brothers are fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen years old. Mot is loud, a whiner and a jerk. Hai is the quiet, studious type. Ba is the biggest, oldest, and strongest, a good-natured mindless jock.

In front of the assembled villagers Commander Be Dan inducts the Nguyen brothers into the Liberation Army. The brothers try to look serious, but they're too proud not to preen. They alternate between horseplay, giggling and pinching, and attempts to maintain a military hearing.

The Broom-Maker presents each brother with a red armband made from red stripes torn from Saigon puppet flags. The brothers bow and put on the armbands.

The Woodcutter reminds the new fighters that a lost rifle is harder to replace than the man who lost it. He tells them the old story about the Front fighter who lost his rifle during a difficult river crossing. Out of shame the fighter asked to be placed in the front ranks of his unit's next attack, where he died gloriously.

"Tomorrow," says the Woodcutter, "you will go on a combat mission far from the village.

You will fight the Long-Nose Elephants. Fight bravely, with fierce determination. I beg you to carry out your duties cleverly."

The recruits brace themselves rigidly to attention as Commander Be Dan presents each new fighter with an AK-47 assault rifle and a web belt hung with canvas pouches heavy with banana clips full of bullets.

Commander Be Dan repeats a Viet Cong slogan: "Brass legs. Iron shoulders. Shoot straight."

While the Nguyen brothers examine their new weapons, the people of Hoa Binh cheer: "HO!

HO! HO!"

The Phuong twins are the first to congratulate the newly eligible bachelors.

As the festivities continue, Song and I double-time to our hooch, along the way surprising young lovers cuddling in the shadows. Light from a growing bonfire flickers across smiling faces and casts friendly giants and patterns of movement across the deck and onto palm tree trunks.

Outside of our hooch the Woodcutter and Commander Be Dan are having a nasty argument.

"No," says Commander Be Dan. "I do not trust the American, the surrenderer. He is a Black Rifle. He is an enemy of the people."

"I must criticize you!" savs the Woodcutter. "Cmmander Be Dan, I must criticize you!"

Commander Be Dan walks away.

The Woodcutter follows close behind. His voice reaches a higher pitch and his gestures become more enthusiastic.

Minutes later, as Song is helping me into my bulky costume, the Woodcutter enters the hooch and calmly announces that Commander Be Dan has agreed to take me along on a combat mission, a particularly important operation ordered by Tiger Eye, the Commander of the Western Region. The Woodcutter presents me with Cowboy's old peace-buttoned Stetson--

lost the night the Phantom Blooper captured me--and a bull horn. I am to carry the bull horn and make propaganda.

I bow. I say, "Thank you, most honored sir." And I'm thinking, This is it. This is what I've been waiting for. Under fire, there is confusion. In the confusion, I can escape.

By the time Song and I return to the bonfire, Ba Can Bo is finishing up one of her painfully boring speeches against the "foreign imperialist

aggressors" and her punch line is Da Dao Quoc My, a slogan that means "Down with the lackey clique! Long live the glorious resistance!"

The villagers respond with a polite cheer, "HO! HO! HO!"

When they see me in my costume, they start laughing.

Ba Can Bo, annoyed at being upstaged, throws me a look with criticism in it, then sits down on a log.

I'm wearing a rice-paper costume Song has painted gray. I'm a B-52 bomber. On my grav paper wings U.S. is painted in overly large letters.

I am surrounded by the children of the village. The children are all wearing little conical paper hats and are armed with toy guns carved from bamboo.

I circle around the common between the rusting hulk of the French armored car and the audience of villagers, making menacing dives at the children, who giggle and shoot at me with their bamboo rifles. I make loud boom-boom-boom noises. A few of the kids grab their stomachs and fall down dead, exaggerating and prolonging their death agonies.

The remaining kids shoot at me faster. I cough a few times, make a few more sloppy dives.

Finally I come in for a big crash, falling down flat on the ground.

The kids suddenly decide that they are crashing too and everybody piles on top of me. Even the dead kids come back to life and crash onto the pile, howling and squealing as though in pain.

An hour before dawn we file out past the village defense perimeter, invigorated by the cold morning air.

A little after first light we meet up with twenty fighters from the Viet Cong Regional Forces, peasant boys and girls in broad-brimmed floppy bush hats, hand grenades in net bags, rubber balls full of water, mismatched web gear, and ragged civilian clothes. Slung on their backs, hammocks full of rice which we call "elephant's intestines."

The fighters from the Hoa Binh Self-Defense Militia include Deputy Commander Song, Master Sergeant Xuan, Bo Doi Bac Si, the Nguyen brothers, the Phuong twins, Battle Mouth, and me, the Phantom Blooper. Together we are almost a section, which is what the French called a platoon. With Commander Be Dan in charge.

Our little army looks pretty hodgepodge and put together with spit and baling wire, and we're armed only with rifles and grenades, but our fighting

spirit is high and our determination strong, and we're ready to travel fast and light.

I'm wearing black pajamas that are way too small for me, plus my cowboy hat, and a gift that Song insisted upon tying across my chest after our hasty breakfast: a red silk sash, to match the red armbands worn by the attacking force.

The sash is of a color which can only be called "screaming red," with a gold-stitched border and a row of gold stars down the center. Pogues in downtown Da Nang will be able to see me.

I'm armed with an olive-drab megaphone. My assignment as the Phantom Blooper is to beat the big drums of propaganda and do a head trip on the enemy, the Elephants, the United States Army. My assignment as a United States Marine is to escape.

Humping along Indian-file with the Chien Si I feel like a target, like back at Khe Sanh when I painted that bull's-eye on my helmet. Not only am I wearing a red sash two shades below neon, but I am six feet three inches tall. Over half of the Viet Cong are under five feet tall.

I'm about as inconspicuous as a water buffalo trying to pass himself off as a baby duck.

Battle Mouth stumbles up and down the line of march, looking lost and confused, stopping fighters and asking them what he's supposed to do. He's loaded down with homemade hand grenades, a borrowed AK-47, a machete, a small-caliber revolver, a B-40 rocket launcher, and half a dozen rockets.

When Song sees Battle Mouth, the super-fighter, she laughs. Then she says to the three Nguyen brothers, who are also on their first combat mission, "Don't fall behind. The tigers will eat you." And she laughs again.

Commander Be Dan, however, is all business. He frowns at Deputy Commander Song for not maintaining noise discipline. He waves his hand and says, "Tien!"--"Forward."

We hump into a jungle full of loud and gaudy birds. No talking on the trail; not because we're afraid of being heard, but so that we can hear approaching aircraft.

I wave goodbye to Johnny Be Cool, the trail-watcher, squatting on a tree branch fifty feet up, a grenade in his hand. He waves back but does not

smile. Johnny Be Cool is always serious about his responsibilities when be is standing guard.

The Front fighter ahead of me in the line of march is wearing red and white tennis shoes. A red ball on the tennis shoes say U.S. KEDS. The fighter is humping a Chinese field radio.

For twelve hours I watch the radioman's tennis shoes and the bouncing red ball.

The radioman is as skinny as a bean pole. He eats snacks constantly as we hump.

We hump, and we hump some more. We hump, swatting big black flies and flailing with rifle butts at clouds of mosquitoes too thick to see through. We stagger up rocky trails into a landscape of brutally stark hypnotic beauty that is teeming with life. Purple valleys. Brown mountains like the backs of dinosaurs. Birds the color of fire. Snakes with heads like semiprecious stones. In our rubber sandals we climb outcroppings of black volcanic rock.

We descend on a trail beneath black cliffs. We stumble down into riverbottom land that reveals new shades of green so fast that we are swallowed up by a rainbow of greens.

Our point man is a girl about fifteen years old. Lifting a rifle almost as big as she is over her head, she calls a halt. Commander Be Dan moves up the line of march to investigate. The radioman in the Keds sticks close to the Commander, so I go too.

The girl on point is excited. She aims a finger at the deck. Commander Be Dan squats down, examines the trail, then nods his approval. It is a good omen for our mission: tiger tracks on the trail.

We hump through a defoliated rain forest that is too dead even to smell dead. Ancient trees stand stark and black and stripped of leaves. The black trees are hung with limp wind-blown flowers that are parachutes from illumination shells.

Later we see trees that are as white as bone, sun-bleached skeletons of the great hardwoods, white trees with black leaves. The trunks and branches of the trees are warped by unnatural cancerous growths that look like human faces and human hands and human fingers growing out of decaying wood.

In the poisonous folds of the defoliated rain forest we see monsters, freaks, and mutants. We see a water rat with two heads and as big as a dog,

birds with extra feet coming out of their backs, Siamese-twin bullfrogs joined at the stomach. The bullfrogs scurry for cover with clumsy and desperately frantic movements horrible to see, finally sinking into oozing slime inhabited by shadows that are alive and best never seen by human eyes.

Total light-and-noise discipline forbids our shooting the deformed animals out of kindness.

Night comes but we do not make camp. We march on. The order is repeated down the trail from fighter to fighter by hand signal: une nuit blanche--"White Night." We will march all night without stopping and without sleep.

The night march turns into a real ball-breakiiig hump. Every step of the way the jungle grabs at us as though alive. The rocks attack us. My feet are numb and I got rock-bites all over my legs. I'm bleeding. We're all bleeding. But I'm the only one who's straining to keep up. It's easy to see that the Viet Cong cut their baby teeth on ball-breaking humps.

I lean into it and take it one step at a time. One step at a time. I can almost hear Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim, my Senior Drill Instructor back on Parris island. "Private Joker," he says, rapping me on my chrome dome helmet liner with a bamboo swagger stick, after I have had the bad manners to faint on a

three-mile run with full gear and a backpack full of rocks in one-hundred-degree heat. "You little maggot! You will put forth effort! You better show me something, sweet pea. You better start shitting me some Tiffany cuff links."

We hump. The sun comes up. We hump some more. The radioman looks back at me constantly to see how I'm keeping up. And Commander Be Dan, who is on the move constantly up and down the line of march, checks me out each time he goes by, like a doctor looking over a patient in a terminal ward. But be doesn't say anvthing.

I'm insulted by all this attention. What am I, a candy ass? Some kind of New Guy? I want to say, "Hey--I'm a United States Marine, people. I will hump until my leg falls off. No sweat.

Marines know how to hop."

Every time we pass anything that looks like it might possibly be food, the radioman eats it.

Bananas, coconuts, berries, green leafy plants, orchids, even honey ants, down they go. The Viet Cong radioman is defoliating the jungle by eating it.

We hump.

We have to go far away from Hoa Binh to fight, because the Woodctitter has a deal with General Fang Cat, the province chief, not to attack anything within the General's Tactical Area of Responsibility. In exchange, the General reports that there is no Viet Cong activity in our area and that Hoa Binh is a leper colony.

We're going to team up with a battalion-size force and attack an enemy fortress twenty miles south of Khe Sanh.

We see two old men cutting down a banana tree. They wave.

In a bombed-out clearing the order comes back to pick up the pace. "Tien! Tien!"

We enter a smelly black-water swamp. The water is neck-deep and teeming with slithering invisible nameless things and leeches like big black garden slugs. We wade through slime, rifles held high, our sandaled feet straining for traction on an underwater bridge that can't be seen from the air. Some of the fighters giggle from the tickling on our legs as fish nibble at our scabs.

Then we're pushing through blue-green elephant grass ten feet high and as sharp as swords.

The deck is a damp, spongy layer of decaving leaves. Creepers and vines grab at our legs and feet as though alive.

We move through the black jungle as silent as ghosts. We don't fight against the jungle the way foreigners do. The jungle is alive and the jungle never dies. The jungle is the one thing you can't beat, and the fighters know it.

To the Americans the jungle is a real and permanent enemy. The jungle is undisciplined. The jungle does not respond to subpoenas. The jungle definitely is not going along with the program.

The jungle grows and eats and fucks and dies and just goes on and on and on, getting bigger and meaner. The jungle is always hungry, always ready to meet new people and make new friends. The jungle is cruel, but fair.

To a place older than the dinosaurs come puny Americans wagging their fingers like sternlibrarians telling library patrons to keep quiet. Naughty jungle, say the white foreigners, and the jungle welcomes them in with big yellow flowers and funny brown monkeys.

When night comes, the jungle sucks their brains out, boils them alive, pulls out their hearts and eats them whole, then swallows up their pale pink bodies, because the jungle eats raw meat and shits dry bones and the bones fall apart and flesh scraps rot and the jungle stands like a black wall while the jungle eats more raw meat and shits out more dry bones and a billion insects are chewing and chewing until the jungle sounds like an eating machine bigger than the world and the green cannibal engine's moving parts are all lubricated by warm red blood and the jungle just goes on and on forever and it never stops feeding.

White Night. When we feel safe we light little perfume bottles full of kerosene. The perfume bottles have been fitted with wicks held in place by shell casings. As we move down the trail the golden dots are like a string of fireflies flying in formation.

A shadow on the trail! The order comes back: danger, halt.

"Dong Lai," says Commander Be Dan on his way up to the point to investigate.

After a infinite or so Commander Be Dan gives us permission to bunch up. We move toward the bad smell.

In the faint flickering light of our tiny lamps we can see the great head of a tiger, still fierce, still beautiful, with teeth as sharp as the point of a bayonet and thicker than a man's thumb.

The eyes are gone. The orange-and-black-striped fur is charred and burned. The huge claws are dug deep into the earth. The powerful jaws are locked in a final tree-shaking roar of defiance.

We all crowd in for a quick look.

Even in death there is something royal about all eight-hundred-pound Bengal tiger. We can all see the tiger, awesome in his final moments, roaring, pouncing, clawing at the fire that falls from the sky, strong and beautiful in a burning jungle. We see the tiger, wet with fire, fighting fearlessly against a power it could never understand. Then the great beast shrivels to ash under a splash of napalm while jellied gasoline drips from tree branches like hot jam.

As we stare in respectful silence at the napalmed tiger, Commander Be Dan reaches down, grabs one of the big smooth ivory fangs, gives it a hard tug, says, "A good omen," and then moves out.

Without a word or a sound, each of the Chien Si touches the tiger's tooth in turn, then moves on.

I touch it too.

At dawn we take a break on the strangely silent site of the abandoned Marine Corps Combat Base at Khe Sanh.

The scary, ghost-guarded mound of red dirt has already been plowed and the Word is that it's to become a coffee-bean plantation.

The section will rest until noon before moving on, because we know that when the day is hottest, Americans in the field break for chow.

Not much is left of my old hometown. What the Marines left behind as junk, refugees have hauled off as building materials or to sell on the black market: scraps of lumber, rusty truck parts, torn plastic sheeting, brass shell casings, scraps of rotting canvas, steel planking from the airfield. Our trash is their treasure, and the army ants have stripped the hill clean.

I sit down on some crumbling sandbags where I estimate Black John Wayne's bunker used to be. It's hard to be sure. In the year since the Woodcutter captured me, the jungle has come back like thick hair sprouting all over a bald man's head. I should feel at home here, but I don't.

Commander Be Dan squats near me, not for a neighborly visit but to keep an eye on me.

Being back on my old stomping grounds might revive my bad road habits as a running dog lackey of the imperialists.

The Viet Cong soldiers laugh, eat chow, and tell tall tales, sea stories, about their many heroic exploits against the Black Rifles who held Khe Sanh. When the lies of the New Guys get too big, the older Chien Si tell the New Guys about fighting the French as Viet Minh, the Viet Cong "Old Corps," back when war was really tough.

Commander Be Dan's radioman sits next to me. I've already assumed that Commander Be Dan has ordered the radioman to stand guai-d over me and waste me if I so much as blink an eye.

The radioiman puts out his hand, touches his chest with his other hand. "Ha Ngoc," he says shyly, politely avoiding looking me directly in the eye. Then: "I have never met an American bandit.

I shake Ha Ngoc's hand. "Bao Chi," I say.

"Bao Chi Chien Si My?"

I nod. "Yes," I say in Vietnamese, "Bao Chi, the American who fights for the Front."

Ha Ngoc smiles. "American," he says, pointing at his tennis shoes. "American." Then he says, "You know, Bao Chi, America must be supernaturally rich because Americans shoot very many bullets."

Ha Ngoc digs into his shirt pocket and pulls out a pack of Ruby Queen cigarettes. "Truoc La?

" he says, offering me the pack. I shake mv head as he lights up the bitter black tobacco.

"Lien So," he says, showing me his wristwatch. Russian. I nod. Ha Ngoc pulls the wooden plug from a length of bamboo shoot he has fashioned into a canteen. He offers me a drink of green tea. Only after I decline does he take a drink himself.

Then Ha Ngoe fumbles around inside his muddy knapsack and produces two mangoes. He offers me one.

"Cam on." I say, "Thank you." I accept a mango. I take a bite.

Ha Ngoc smiles. He pulls a black ballpoint pen from his knapsack and shows it to me like it's a family heirloom. On the pen is Chinese writing in gold characters. I look the pen over like it's a valuable antique and nod my approval. "Good," I say, but Ha Ngoc just looks at me without expression, not satisfied with my reaction. So I say, "This is the finest specimen of a Chinese ballpoint pen I have ever seen in my entire life." And Ha Ngoc beams, a rich man whose wealth has been confirmed by the highest source.

We eat tangy mangoes. "I don't hate Americans," Ha Ngoc says. "I only kill them because they have killed so many of my friends."

I nod. I say, "There it is."

Commander Be Dan is having a cigarette too. Using a page torn from his pocket diary, he's rolling his own, like my grandfather used to do.

Ha Ngoc produces a greasy paperback book from his knapsack. The title of the book is How to Win Friends and Influence People, in French. There's a photograph of Dale Carnegie on the back. The book has lost its spine and the loose pages are bound together by a black rubber band.

Ha Ngoc shuffles through the book to a dog-eared page, then suddenly decides to tell Commander Be Dan a Viet Cong joke. I try to follow, but my

Vietnamese is not up to the test. Something about how many Comrade Lizards have been killed by the latest American shellings, as the enemy cannons make war on the trees. It seems that Comrade Lizard is quite a hero of the revolution because it costs the Americans so many valuable bombs to kill him.

So even with their supernatural supply of big shells the Americans will never win, because in Viet Nam even the lizards fight back with a strong spirit.

Ha Ngoc laughs at his own joke, but Commander Be Dan ignores Ha Ngoc. The Commander is examining his right leg, burning off leeches with his cigarette and then massaging the triangular bites.

Ha Ngoc, thinking perhaps that he has overlooked an important chapter, goes back to reading his book.

At noon, when the hot sun is vibrating in the sky like a brass gong, we saddle up. Ha Ngoc struggles into his radio harness. I give him a hand lifting the heavy radio and help him adjust the straps.

Down the hill the Chien Si are laughing uproariously at Battle Mouth's latest antics. Battle Mouth, with his pack on his back, is sitting on the ground, struggling to get up, but without success. Someone has tied Battle Mouth's pack straps to a root.

"Tien," says Commander Be Dan, and we move out.

Ha Ngoc teases me. "Now, Bao Chi, don't you be an Elephant." An Elephant is an Army grunt in the field, so named for the way in which American columns glide through the jungle undetected. I laugh.

After a few hours the horizon of palm fronds opens up and we emerge from the jungle onto a paved road. We file past an old French kilometer marker, a stubby white tooth of cement with fading red numbers.

A mile down the road we come to a pattern of bomb craters. Only a few of the bombs have hit the road, which is one of the great network of paved roads, cart trails, and jungle paths known to the Viet Cong as the Strategic Trail and to the Americans as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The craters in the road have already been repaired by the road menders, because this is hard-core VC country.

We pass a deserted banana plantation. The moaning wind that lives inside the big house sounds like the voices of the vines have climbed inch by inch up all the walls. The windows are black holes. The porch that goes

all the way around the house has only a few planks remaining that have not been broken. In one of the empty windows sits a baby monkey. The baby monkey watches us with intense interest, his eyes too big for his head, his face almost human.

On the outskirts of a large village we see a work crew of hundreds of men, women, and children, a Dan Cong Worker Brigade.

We see a huge blue-gray Molotova Russian army truck being refueled with gasoline which has been stored in old wine bottles.

The Dan Cong are repairing the road. The men drag boulders down out of the hills with ropes, levers, and brute force. The women pound on the boulders with sledgehammers, splitting each stone into chunks. Children with hammers pound the chunks of stone into smaller pieces. This back-breaking process is known as how to make gravel in Viet Nam.

Building the Strategic Trail and keeping it open in spite of the greatest aerial bombardment in history is an incredible ball-busting monster victory against all odds that is exactly the kind of miracle American pioneers once performed in another time, another place, when there was a wild frontier and only the grunts had the nerve to go there, before the Wild West became tame enough to become infested by pogues, pencil-pushers, and schoolmarms, who came out on the railroad, and stayed, and spread, like the plague.

Commander Be Dan holds up his hand.

Halt. The Commander barks out an order and the Chien Si form into a column of twos. I fall in beside Ha Ngoc.

"Tien!" says the Commander, and we march into the village in formation, standing tall, lean and mean, like Parris Island recruits marching down the grinder on graduation day.

"Compatriots!" says Commander Be Dan to the workers, proudly. "We are the liberation forces!"

The cheers of the workers along the road bring out Self-Defense Militia sentries, followed by the village elders.

The section halts at the Commander's order. We snap to attention, ignoring the heat, insects, and the hot asphalt under our rubber sandals.

Commander Be Dan is greeted by the village elders and a Viet Cong officer under the big bamboo star over the village gate. The elders are a

fireteam of dignified and ancient men, bowing and smiling. The Viet Cong officer is about eightenn years old.

Commander Be Dan bows to each man, salutes the local Chien Si commander, then shakes hands all around.

There is some polite conversation, ending with the local commander's proud declaration to Commander Be Dan, "Comrade Major, we have forced the Americans to eat soup with a fork!

" This must be the punch line to a joke, because everyone laughs.

Executing a perfect about-face, Commander Be Dan gives us the order to fall out.

The sun is low in the sky, so everyone relaxes. Twilight is safe time because the daylight air raids are over and it's still too early for the night raids. We are escorted through the village to a huge bonfire, where the women of hte village have prepared a feast. Village trail watchers must have reported that we were on the way well in advance of our arrival.

The familiar murmur of activity and the smells of food, farm animals, and cook fires remind us of our village and we feel a little homesick. But not for long, because we are made welcome.

As usual, I am the star. In show business at last! Everyone is curious about the Chien Si My, the American Front fighter. Some people speak to me in French. Others ask me if I am Lien So--"Russian." But most of the villagers are eager to try out an English words they know on me, either to show off or to test the accuracy of their pronunciations.

I am becoming more famous than Jesse James. Little kids follow me around in mobs. They are happy and healthy kids, not at all like the sad and dirty little savages in the occupied zones. Instead of yelling, "You give me one cigarette! You give me one cigarette!" they ask politely, "May o day?"--"Where do you live?"

The children all love me, but from the adults I get mixed reviews. One woman glares at me with hatred. As I walk by, the woman snatches off her sandals and throws them against a wall.

A mangy dog lopes by, yapping at a yellow butterfly.

All of the kids want to touch my nose. As soon as I sit down they crowd in to touch my nose.

Each time a kid touches my nose he goes into a spasm of hysterical laughter, as though my nose is absolutely the funniest thing any of the kids

have ever seen.

We are fed in style on fragrant roast pigs and yams, with optional side order of elephant steaks, monkey stew, and dog meat cold cuts, all cooked over a bonfire fueld by coconut shells.

Little girls, bashful with strangers, give us flowers, then giggle and hide their faces with their hands. The men and women who were working on the road when we arrived pat us on the back. These are the people Mao talks about in that Little Red Book that Ba Can Bo is always reading to us back in Hoa Binh, hte people who are like an ocean in which the Front guerrillas swim while the enemy drowns. The VC Nation.

Beneath an obelisk of concrete topped with red metal stars, four teenaged girls with matching blue guitars sing "A Hard Day's Night" in Vietnamese. They are not good musicians, but they are very energetic. They get confused and forget the lyrics. They hit sour notes on the guitars. When they make a mistake they blush and laugh it off and the audience laughs with them.

The village elders and the local Chien Si commander have got Commander Be Dan in a huddle, all of them squatting in a semicircle on the village common. With bullets they draw maps in the dirt. Each person of influence lobbies for an enemy position to be attacked.

I drink rice wine. I drink a lot of rice wine. I drink rice wine flat on my back on some gunnysacks full of unhusked rice, surrounded by twenty of the village children, who have adopted me and my nose.

As I fall asleep the mountains grumble and metal talks to the earth.

We sleep late the next day and leave the village at twilight. From now on we'll be marching only by night because we are leaving the Liberated Zone.

The village is deserted. The Dan Cong have been out on the road since dawn, making big rocks into little rocks.

The village elders wave goodbye. "Trang," they say--"Victory." And they say, "Gia Phong"--

"Liberation."

We march down a dirt road that has been camouflaged from air recon by planting saplings into holes every few yards, saplings that are dug up and replanted every time the road is used by trucks.

After we turn off the road and enter a treeline we cut green leafy twigs and tie them to our clothing, knapsacks, and weapons. Ha Ngoc the radioman and I laugh as we carefully decorate each other with fresh greenery until we both look like shrubbery with legs.

We come out of the treeline and walk along a riverback. We load onto a ferry barge to cross the river. The ferry barge is constructed of heavy timbers, hand-hewn and bolted together.

The weathered wood is bleached white above the waterline. Two giant ropes hold the barge in place as a man poles it across.

The barge man has a muscular chest and muscular arms and legs. He's wearing faded Levi's cutoffs and has tied an olive-drab T-shirt around his forehead. He's blind.

All the way across the river the blind barge man stares at me with hatred. His unseeing eyes have pupils as white as opals. "I smell a foreigner," he says, and suddenly picks up a machete and hacks at the air around him.

Song speaks to the blind barge man sternly and he reluctantly hands over the machete.

"Gia Phong, Dong Chi," says the blind barge man as we file off his barge. "Liberation, comrades."

"Gia Phong," we all say.

As the blind barge man poles away from the riverbank he calls out to us, "Kill the American!"

We hump. We're back in the lowlands now. We maintain total noise discipline and communicate only with hand signals.

Master Sergeant Xuan finds boot tracks, large and deep, the tracks of Americans, not puppet armymen. We can see the imprints of their rifle butts where they sat to rest. Master Sergeant Xuan digs up trash from their tin-skinned food with a fixed bayonet. If their C-rations are only half-eaten it means that the enemy fighters plan to return to their base by the end of the day. Master Sergeant Xuan shows Commander Be Dan some of the empty C-ration cans.

The cans are still moist inside and have been scraped clean.

The Commander puts a finger on his nose to signal "long-noses" and turns so that the section can see his signal, then looks at Master Sergeant Xuan. The Master Sergeant nods.

As the signal is repeated down the trail, Battle Mouth says in a big whisper: "I will tear off their warmongering capitalistic arms and legs. I will defecate into their water holes. I will eat their faces with my teeth. I will-"

Commander Be Dan grabs Battle Mouth by the throat. "Battle Mouth, do not speak or I will shoot you myself."

Battle Mouth pouts, but quietly.

We hump another hundred yards. In the distance, artillery crumps. Nearby and closing, the whack-whack of choppers.

Commander Be Dan first signals for the section to pick up the pace, but by the time we're all running flat out he suddenly raises his hand--stop--and then lowers it to the ground. We crash down onto our bellies and crawl to cover.

Ha Ngoc the radioman sniffs the air, looks back at me, points to his nose, then pinches his nose and frowns, saying silently, "I smell Americans."

While Commander Be Dan reads the terrain and signals fighters into defensive positions, Ha Ngoc punches my arm, then points to starboard. I can't see anything, but Ha Ngoc points again.

We listen for the whir of insects that tells us that we're safe, but the insects are ominously silent. A jungle full of noisy birds is silent.

Ha Ngoc makes a fist and walks his fist along the ground to say, "The Elephants are coming."

The fighters call Army troopers "Elephants" because they make so much noise and carry so much equipment.

Raising myself up on painfully bruised elbows, I hear a faint rhythmic chomping sound. The sounds get louder and louder and more distinct until it is clearly the whack of a machete.

Ha Ngoc and I burrow deeper into the dirt.

Heavy boots crunch into dry scraps of rotten bamboo. Voices drift in on the wind, heavy voices, deep voices that talk slowly.

A helmet covered with camouflage canvas emerges an inch at a time from a wall of jungle that is a hundred shades of green. Half of a sweaty face appears, eyes looking up for snipers and down for booby traps and antipersonnel mines. Then a bulky sun-faded flak jacket.

Then the black barrel of an M-16.

The point man is a Marine snuffy, breaking trail with a machete.

I'm not sure I can hack this shit. These are not Elephants, they're Black Rifles--Marines.

What am I supposed to do, shoot them or buy them a beer? And if I try to cross over from our lines to their lines, will my ass be blown off by the Viet Cong, or by the Marines, or both?

My plan has always been simple escape and evade, not suicide. Now may be the time to make my move, but I sure as shit better do it by the numbers and not screw it up.

The point man is a skuzzy field Marine with a spare set of black socks full of C-ration cans slung around his neck. He carries his M-16 pointing down the trail and his finger is on the trigger. The drag, the deuce point, is breaking bush. I can see glistening drops of sweat flying from the drag's arm as he chops through green bamboo stalks with a machete. Next comes the squad leader, followed by his radioman.

The squad leader is talking into a radio handset which has been taped inside a clear plastic bag. He tosses the handset back to his radioman, then raises his hand, fingers spread wide: stop. The radioman talks into the handset. The whip antenna wagging above his field radio makes him a beautiful target.

I feel like standing up and yelling at them, "Keep your interval, people. Keep your interval or you will draw fire."

It's high noon and hot. The jungle is green fire. Marines are setting in for chow. Slack time, smoke 'em if you got 'em. It's a Marine rifle company, probably scouting an LZ--the blat-blat-blat of massed helicopters echoes along the horizon. It's harvest time; a battalion must be planning to nail some VC rice caches.

The fighters wait. We don't move. We are so close to the Marines we can see the salt-ring stains under the armpits of their jungle utilities, evidence of months of nonstop sweating. The plodding workhorses of the infantry are loaded down with heavy gear. We can hear the clink and rustle of their web gear as they groan and drop their packs.

A grunt sits down on his helmet and lights up a C-ration cigarette. Enjoying the relief from the hated weight of the helmet, he rubs the dark red line indented into his forehead by the band inside the helmet liner. He breaks out a green plastic canteen from the rack of four slung on the back of his brass-grommeted web belt.

Somebody's Funny Gunny appears, spooning a bite of C-rations into his mouth. The Gunny swats away a mosquito with a white plastic spoon and breaks out a small plastic squeeze bottle of bug juice, insect repellent, from a black band of inner-tube rubber around his helmet.

He's a typical grizzled bleary-eyed twenty-year Gunny with a beer belly, not too bright, prematurely cantankerous, hard as a tank hull. "Bradfield, you shitbird. Get your head out of your ass and crack out your E-tool. Or is sitting on your ass what they taught you down in Dago in the Hollywood Marines?"

The Gunny turns away and addresses the lead platoon: "Okay, people, all I want to see is assholes and elbows. Home is where you dig it. Make them titty-deep, people, most ricky-tick. "

Private Bradfield grunts, field-strips his cigarette, drops off his sweat-soaked flak jacket, then, like a farmer, proceeds to till the soil with his entrenching tool so that he can plant himself in a temporary grave. He hits the deck with the E-tool, hard, looking at the Gunny. He wipes the sweat from his face with an OD towel bung around his neck and says, "God damn every son of a bitch in the world who ain't here."

Commander Be Dan gives the order and we crawl, slowly, inch by inch, for maybe fifty yards. We are beginning to think we have safely broken contact with the Marines when a single shot punches a hole into the hot day. One of our scouts has fired a signal shot. The shot is answered by automatic rifle fire.

For some reason we'll never know, somebody issued a movement order and the Marines saddled up. There is only one marching order for Marines: he who hesitates will be left behind.

Having stumbled into us by accident, now the Marines close in for the kill; movement to contact, better known as killer instinct. The rifle company throws out an angry crackle of recon-by-fire.

Nothing is as scary as that silence between breaths after you hear shooting and you don't know if it's going to hit you or not.

The fighters feel better when Commander Be Dan says, "Ban!" The section opens fire. It's better to have something to do, then you don't have time to think too much.

"Di di mau!" is the order--"Move and move fast."

We are not going to "grab the enemy by the belt." If we were going to fight we would move in closer to the enemy so that the Marines can't use supporting arms against us, land-based artillery, naval artillery, and Tac-Air close air support.

I'm watching for a chance to make a break for it. A firefight is not the best time to be showing yourself to an advancing force, but maybe I'm too big to be mistaken for a Charlie.

Or maybe the grunts will shoot me first and measure me later.

Suddenly the section breaks cover and we fall back toward the heavy jungle, firing as we go.

M-60 machine-gun bullets bite deep into the trunks of trees and whine as they ricochet off boulders. Explosions rock the earth and shrapnel snaps harmlessly through layered green leaves.

From nowhere appears a big black grunt with an M-60 machine gun, double-timing toward us, grasping the bipod legs, his hand in an asbestos glove, firing from the hip, playing John Wayne, some gungy brass-balls son of a bitch, a natural born eye-shooter and apprentice widow-maker, hard-charging toward a Bronze Star by way of a Purple Heart.

I reach for a weapon but all I've got is a megaphone. It's a reflex action. I feel silly. Before I can return fire with the megaphone or Chieu Hoi or think of a way to cool out this black Marine gunner who's as big as a tank and who can chop up brass faster than a spider monkey jacking off, the big black gunner goes down, sinking in slow motion behind a golden sparkle of ejecting shell casings.

Ha Ngoc, the radioman, pulls me to my feet while Commander Be Dan lays down covering fire.

A hot spasm of pain running up my right side is my first hint that I've been hit. I look down.

I've seen a lot of gunshot wounds. I'm standing up, I'm moving, and I haven't bled to death yet. As I'm helped along by Ha Ngoc I diagnose it as a T&T wound in the right thigh, through and through, no bones hit, no major arteries cut. Now I've got a golden oportunity to prove that sea story bullshit about how one-legged Marines know how to hop.

I look back and I can see a Corpsman cutting off the black gunner's pants with a K-bar. The Corpsman, ignoring the firefight in progress all around him, stands up and calls for a dustoff, an immediate medevac. The

Corpsman is wearing two .38-caliber revolvers in tied-down holsters, like a Wild West gunfighter.

As we move away, we can hear the Black Rifles calling out to one another: "Throw a few rounds in there!" "Where are those fucking gunships?" "Check fire! Check fire!" "Have you got movement?" "Recon that treeline!"

Ha Ngoc is little, but incredibly strong. He helps me stumble toward a treeline as bullets hiss over our heads like pieces of hot air.

A bullet hits Ha Ngoc in the back of the head and comes out of his face. He looks at me, surprised, his face only inches from my own. There is an ugly wet cavity between his nose and his cheekbone. Ha Ngoc breathes his last breath into my face and falls dead at my feet.

Looking back, I see a Marine Corps Captain, a squared-away honcho of the lean and the mean. Officers wear no rank insignia in the field, but his age and bearing, his neatly trimmed mustache, his hair high and tight, mark him as a captain.

He's carrying a pump shotgun. Across his chest is a belt studded with all-brass service rounds for the shotgun.

The Captain is wearing yellow pigskin shooting gloves, a starched-and-blocked tiger-stripe utility cover, a black leather shoulder holster with a .45-caliber automatic pistol, and aviator sunglasses. A wristwatch hangs from the top buttonhole of his jungle utilities jacket. He is pumping his arm up and down like a piston. "Go. Go. Go."

The Captain has never seen a white Viet Cong. He looks at me and he doesn't know what to do, shoot me or buy me a beer. The rule under Grunt Law is shoot first and forget about asking the questions. I give the Captain a thumbs-up and he looks at me like Moses looking at the burning bush.

While the Captain hesitates, Commander Be Dan fires.

The Captain goes down, hit in the legs.

The Marines are advancing on line, shooting everything that moves.

I turn away and run like a big-assed bird, clumsy, limping, but ignoring the pain, thinking only that I either find cover most ricky-tick or my health record is going to be turned into a fuck story. A treeline used to mean danger; now it means safety.

In the treeline Commander Be Dan is waiting for me. As I stare at the silent jungle, seeing nothing, Commander Be Dan and the Chien Si

materialize as though by magic. I never had a chance to escape. I was somebody's favorite sight picture every step of the way.

Commander Be Dan orders me to lie down on a hammock. Fighters lift me up and carry me, and we move fast, deep into the jungle where everything is black and green or green and black. We ignore the thumping shells and the thuds of bombs and the mechanical buzzing of gunships as the Black Rifles in their helpless impotence and fury drop tons of iron onto Comrade Lizard.

So much for my best chance to escape.

The section humps half a day, climbing higher and higher into the Dong Tri Mountains, up cart trails that are steep and rugged, until we are so far away from the war that it seems impossible that the war ever existed. Up here the silence is awesome, like in a church, and is broken only by the gentle warble of jungle streams; no matter where you are in the rain forest, the soft murmur of rushing water is always heard. The sound of the water is soothing.

The whole rest of the world seems like a dream. It's spooky here but it's beautiful, and the shooting war is nothing more than a bad memory we have left behind in some bad place in a valley far below.

I wonder why we don't throw away our guns and file claims to homestead and stay up here forever. Let them fight like fools in the lowlands. We'll stay up here and be mountain men.

But the peace is a false peace and the silence is only another form of military camouflage. Bo Doi scouts greet us on the trail. The Bo Doi guide us past sentries, antiaircraft guns, artillery pieces, and bunker complexes manned by rifle companies of elite North Vietnamese troops.

The Bo Doi open a tree trunk, revealing a tunnel entrance so ingeniously concealed that you could sit down next to it and never see it. We step into the tree and climb down into the tunnel. As usual, I'm a problem, because my shoulders are too big to fit through the frequent trapdoors connecting the various tunnels. When I get stuck, the fighters ahead of me pull and the fighters behind me push. I feel like a fat lady trying to get down into a submarine.

Down under the ground the tunnels expand until they are big enough to drive a truck through.

We hump into a tunnel complex that is vast and well equipped, a city of people buried in a mountain.

As we go deeper, the tunnels become cleaner and more squared away. The cave walls are no longer damp and spider-webbed. We are no longer attacked by black clouds of screeching bats. We see green canvas tents pitched in perfect alignment, mounds of wooden crates neatly stacked, electric lights running on generators, a hospital with clean white sheets and staffed by white-gowned doctors and nurses.

It's Victor Charlie's Big PX.

We are assigned a bivouac next to a printing press. The fighters sling their hammocks on hitching posts conveniently provided.

We try to sleep. The printing press goes ka-chunk ka-chunk all night--if it is night--and never stops.

When I wake up there are a dozen Bo Doi troopers standing over me, staring at me. I am The Thing that just arrived from outer space aboard a UFO.

The Bo Doi are in full uniform and look like schoolboys. As I sit up they giggle, embarrassed, and hurry away.

Someone has removed the battle dressing from my thigh and has replaced it with a clean white hospital bandage.

Commander Be Dan squats down next to me and hands me some tin-skinned food. The food is a Chinese version of C-rations. We cut open the cans with Commander Be Dan's homemade knife.

The food is mostly vegetables and noodles, with mystery meat, and smells like dead fish. I'm trying to decide how to decline gracefully when Commander Be Dan spits out a mouthful of food and throws a half-eaten can of beans into a trash pit. I'm stunned to hear him say in English: "Chinese food is shit."

After chow, I walk over and watch the printing press cough out freshly printed sheets of pulpy yellow paper.

The printing press is very old, a heavy block of steel and chipped black enamel, manufactured back when things were made to last forever. Every mechanical part in the press is badly worn, yet clean and well oiled. Obviously the printing press is well cared for or it would not work at all. It's like the old John Deere tractor we had on the farm back in Alabama. My

dad would always say, "It's held together with spit and baling wire. Don't look at it the wrong way or it will fall apart."

The printer comes over and greets me with a smile. He is a fat little man with a jolly Buddha-face, wearing an ink-splattered white shirt. He tells me in English how proud he is of his press, how it was smuggled out of Saigon and transported in hundreds of pieces by hundreds of people and then reassembled one piece at a time in the tunnel.

After asking me if I would like to have some tea, the printer says, "Do you know Jane Fonda?

" He hands me a big piece of type as heavy as shrapnel. He smells of ink and has ink under his fingernails. "She's an American too."

"No. Sorry," I say. The printer looks disappointed.

"Do you know the writings of Mister Mark Twain?"

"Sure. I've read a few of his books."

The printer nods, satisfied. As I examine the strangely accented letter on the piece of type, the printer takes out a pocket notebook and a fountain pen and says, "Chien Si My, why do your armymen go ten thousand miles from home to live a helluva life and to die on this land?

This country is not yours. We do no harm to your homeland. Why have you come here to kill our men and women and destroy our homeland?"

I don't know what to say.

The printer continues: "You cannot defeat us. You do not even know who we are. You cannot even see us. Your country lives inside a dream and tries to kill anything outside of the dream, but we live in the real world, so you cannot kill us. We have fought for twenty years and we will fight on until weare victorious, until we have freedom. Just as your forefathers did two hundred years ago. Uncle Ho began the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence by quoting the American Declaration of Independence: 'All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' American armymen no longer fight to protect their liberty but to steal ours. Chien Si My, how did your great and heroic country lose its greatness and allow itself to be taken over by gangsters?"

The printer is watching me closely as he speaks, pen poised, as though he expects me to reveal the secrets of the universe in twenty-five words or less. Suddenly I realize that I am being interviewed for a Front newspaper.

"Khoung Biet," I say-"I don't know."

The printer nods, disappointed, but easily convinced that I really don't know.

The printer looks at his wristwatch. He says, "You know, some of the big shots here want to send you to prison in Hanoi. But you have a powerful friend in the Front, Tiger Eye, the Commander of the Western Region." He looks at his wristwatch again. "Come with me, please."

The printer says to Commander Be Dan, "Comrade Major, may I please speak with you?" and the Commander joins us. We walk past strange humming machines, manned by workers, chugging away, smelling of Cosmoline and oil, factories under the earth.

We pass a huge tent. Inside, seated at a long narrow table, are fifty or sixty North Vietnamese Army officers in short-sleeved khaki uniforms, red collar tab rank insignia heavy with brass stars. The officers are eating, drinking tea, playing cards, dropping sugar cubes into their coffee, telling jokes, telling lies, laughing, smoking pipes and cigars, reading newspapers.

We see a religious shrine ten feet high, a brass Buddha.

We enter a large chamber filled with a couple of hundred Bo Doi snuffies squatting on a floor of beaten earth covered by palm fronds. The Bo Doi are all nineteen years old, healthy and strong, with regulation haircuts and clean khaki shirts and shorts. They are so squared-away, they must have junk-on-the-junk inspections five times a day, or maybe it's junk-on-the-hammock.

Many of the Bo Doi are writing in small pocket diaries. Others are eating snacks, sleeping, writing letters, reading letters from home, or telling sea stories to their comrades and passing around photographs of pretty girls they claim are their girlfriends.

At the far end of the chamber is a small movie screen.

The printer, Commander Be Dan, and I squat and wait. After a few minutes the electric lights are lowered and a film projector switches on. The projector hums, rattles noisily, wheezes, snorts, and threatens to explode. Finally light appears on the screen and we see an old Charlie Chaplin film with French subtitles.

We watch the flickering, jerky black-and-white images on the screen. The Bo Doi laugh and cheer. "Charlot! Charlot!" They laugh, slapping their stomachs and thighs.

Charlie Chaplin flickers across the crude rice-paper screen, looking sad. He's up in the Yukon someplace, looking for gold, but not finding any. So he makes a federal case out of eating his shoe.

The Bo Doi laugh so hard that there are tears in their eyes. "Charlot! Charlot!"

After the movie Commander Be Dan and I thank the printer for taking us to the movie. We say goodbye to the printer, bowing, then shaking hands.

Commander Be Dan and I walk back to our area and fall into our hammocks. Before we go to sleep Commander Be Dan says to me in English: "I liked that movie."

Master Sergeant Xuan wakes us up. We pick up our gear and hump out of the main tunnel complex and down long dark tunnels that get smaller and smaller until, crawling on our hands and knees, we emerge from darkness into blinding sunlight.

We march down again, toward the lowlands.

Climbing down rocky mountain trails is some real number-ten-thousand humping, the worst.

The whole process of walking down a steep incline is clumsy and strains all the wrong muscles. Our backpacks shift back and forth and throw us off balance. My bandaged leg hurts until it goes numb and I have to look at it to see where it is to check my footing. Every few hours a fighter falls, tumbling headlong down the trail, but the worst injury is a broken arm.

At a waterfall Commander Be Dan calls a halt and we eat a meal of glutinous rice and tomatoes.

Speaking over the roar of the waterfall, Commander Be Dan informs us that we will reach our destination by twilight and will be going into battle tonight. We're instructed to take a break for a couple of hours so we'll be fresh for the battle.

Without taking off our sweaty clothes we walk barefoot on slimy moss-covered rocks and into the green water. The fighters dive in. I sit down on a submerged rock and rub my leg.

Song stands on a stone ledge under the waterfall. The water is a monster shower, a collapsing column of wet silver dissolving into sparkling white foam as it hits a jungle pool. Song plays a game to see how long she can stand up under the weight of the falling water before it knocks her into the

pool. Then she climbs out of the water and tries again. Soon the fighters are all competing in the game and are yelling and laughing like children.

I lie back on a submerged rock. Only my face is out of the water. The sun is warm on my face. I close my eyes and relax. The soothing roar of the waterfall makes me sleepy.

After our bodies are clean we sit in the sun in our wet clothes. We watch as Commander Be Dan builds a sand castle on a rock. A flat rock is a VC desk. The sand castle is a "U.S.

Combat Fortress." The Commander uses stones and twigs to mark key positions, the mine fields, the heavy machine guns, the strongest bunkers.

The target, explains the Commander, is a Special Forces compound being used as a base of operations by a secret unit of Nungs--Vietnamese of ethnic Chinese origin, mercenaries who fight under CIA control. The Nungs have been attacking Montagnard villages while disguised as North Vietnamese Army troops. This is a CIA propaganda ploy to induce the Montagnards to join the fight against the liberation forces. Our mission is to destroy the compound.

Commander Be Dan tells each fighter precisely what his or her personal responsibility will be during the battle.

My assignment is to talk to the compound defenders to keep them awake all night before the attack. I will not be in the assault forces because I have not earned the right to carry a weapon, because I am too tall and would confuse the fighters, and because I have a minor wound on my leg. I will remain with Master Sergeant Xuan's rear-guard force, which will cover the withdrawal of the assault troops.

Truong Si Xuan gives me a look that says he is disgusted to be saddled with me, a freak American surrenderer, excess baggage, some kind of silly publicity stunt, a fucking tourist.

Master Sergeant Xuan is a thin man, all bones, muscles, and sinew. He is about seventy years old but looks like he could run up mountainsides all day with a water buffalo on his back and spend the night breaking bricks with his head. He's a tough motherfucker from way back, with ugly shrapnel scars all over his face. He always gives orders to his troops in a threatening tone, as though he'll kill you on the spot if you even hesitate.

After detailing the battle orders, Commander Be Dan invites everyone to make comments or criticisms. We rehash the plan for an hour or so, until

every fighter is in agreement with what is to be done, and how. I point out that the Americans string barbed wire to funnel attack troops into mine fields. The fighters nod their approval of my information, but, as usual, they already know about that. Some changes are made in the plan, based on comments from the fighters. Now that the attack plan is set, discipline will be strictly enforced.

"HOAN HO!" we say--"Hurrah. Let's go!"

As the section saddles up I slip off into the bushes, looking for a place to pee. I do a quick about-face when I see Nguyen Hai, one of the Nguyen brothers, sitting with his back against the base of a tree, eyes closed, mouth open. One of the Phuong twins is with him. Her head is in his lap and is bobbing up and down.

Thinking about the advantages of a coed war, I hurry back to the section, giggling like a teenaged kid--which I am.

We hump down and down, and then we're in a haunted mangrove swamp. Set close together and rooted in smelly water stand hundreds and hundreds of scaly, pale green tree trunks. The smelly water is like sewage mixed with vegetable scraps and inhabited by poisonous snakes.

We are very careful in the swamp because the craters from B-52 lake-bombs are invisible under the waist-deep water. A fighter humping a full load of gear can suddenly sink twenty feet.

As we leave the swamp we see smoke. Black smoke. Too much smoke for cooking fires.

We see red fire on the horizon.

We double-time.

Within minutes we hear small-arms fire, scattered, unopposed. Then we hear screams.

Commander Be Dan recons the ville with his field glasses, sends Master Sergeant Xuan to the left with one squad and Song to the right with another, with orders to attack when they hear firing. I stick asshole-to-elbow with Master Sergeant Xuan.

As the section converges upon the Montagnard village we see maybe fifty men in khaki shirts and shorts, wearing small brown pith helmets and North Vietnamese rank insignia, their uniforms and weapons camouflaged with fresh leaves and twigs.

Nungs, disguised as North Vietnamese Army soldiers, are burning the village, killing the men, raping the women.

We come in fast and open fire at the Commander's order: "Ban!"

The Montagnard huts sit on short stilts. The Yards wear loincloths. The men are scrawny and have bony chests. The women are bare-breasted and sickly. The children have bloated bellies due to malnutrition.

In normal times, there is no love lost between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese.

We spread out. Move and fire. Fire and move. We give the impression of a much larger force than we are, barely thirty fighters, no match for fifty Nung mercenaries.

The new widows are running from dead body to dead body. When each of them finds the right dead body, she wails in agony. Then they all are wailing in agony, and the wails join together into a horrible song.

We follow the retreating Nungs, pressing them, never giving them time to think about turning around and making a stand. As we charge through the village we yell, "XUNG

PHONG!". . . "Comrades, advance!" And we say, "We are the Liberation Army!"

We see an old woman, squatting on top of a table, moaning, holding her stomach--somebody's gutshot grandmother. Bo Doi Bac Si drops back to help her.

The Nungs are tough sons of bitches. They drop a man back every twenty yards. Each man dropped fights until our point men kill him, which takes time.

I try to stay close to Master Sergeant Xuan, as ordered, but my leg has started bleeding again and I lag a few yards behind.

A Nung sniper fires at us from the branches of a tree. Master Sergeant Xuan orders me to stay put, then tries to flank the Nung, exposing himself to draw fire. The Nung fires.

Somebody fires back. The Nung falls out of the tree like a sack of dirty laundry.

Commander Be Dan waves us forward. As we advance, Master Sergeant Xuan pauses and kicks the dying Nung sniper in the balls. The Nung groans, looks up at us without fear or pain. When he sees me, he's confused. Master Sergeant Xuan ends the Nung's confusion with a burst of AK.

We chase the Nungs until we come to flat open ground that has been bulldozed and defoliated, leaving the Special Forces compound a clear field of fire.

A single howitzer inside the compound starts banging out rounds. We fade back into the jungle as a shell bursts harmlessly in the treetops.

We all know that the Phantom fighter-bombers have been called and are already in the air and will be coming in on bomb runs within twenty minutes.

The Nguyen brothers appear, proudly escorting two bound Nungs they have taken prisoner.

The Nguyen brothers are still New Guys.

"Good!" says Commander Be Dan. He waves the Nguyen brothers back. Master Sergeant Xuan steps forward and butt-strokes each Nung prisoner to the ground, then fires a bullet through each of their heads.

Commander Be Dan looks at his wristwatch, then at his map. We follow him to a new position and wait for night. We can hear the Phantom fighter-bombers booming overhead and we can hear the bombs. With our ears and with our feet and with our bones we can hear bombs hitting the edge of the jungle.

We wait for night.

The night is our friend.

For hours, repeating the same speech a hundred times, I talk into an olive-drab battery-powered bullhorn. I read word for word from a script written for me by Ba Can Bo, our political cadre:

"Come, brothers, I say. "You are fighting on the wrong side. Turn the guns around.

"This country is not yours.

"We do no harm to your homeland.

"Why have you come here to kill our men and women and destroy our homeland?

"Do not join with the Saigon lackeys in using armed forces to suppress the just struggle of the South Vietnamese people for freedom and independence.

"Armymen! You are sons of the great American people who have a freedom-loving tradition.

By your barbarous acts, inflicted upon patriots in their own land in the name of deceptive contentions, you besmear the honor of the U.S.A.

"Refuse to obey all orders to carry out mopping up operations to kill the Vietnamese people, to destroy their crops, burn their houses.

"Say 'No!' to the White House gangsters. You are fighting on the wrong side. Honor the memory of your ancestors. join us in our struggle for justice. Turn the guns around . . . "

Commander Be Dan meets with a Chien Si officer. They bow, salute, and shake hands. The officer is smoking a cigar.

The jungle is full of Chien Si fighters now, hundreds of them.

Hoarse, I join Master Sergeant Xuan's rear-guard unit. I imitate my comrades-in-arms by tying black comm wire around my ankles so that if we are forced to go into combat and I am wounded I can be dragged to safety. Or to a burial. The Chien Si fear that if they are not buried in Xa--in their home ground near their ancestors--their souls will be doomed to wander for all eternity, forever alone.

The assault troops check their weapons and move to their attack positions. The Nguyen brothers tie their rifles to their web belts with long pieces of string so that if they are wounded they won't lose their weapons.

For the first time I look at an American compound with the eyes of an attacker. The Special Forces compound is not very big, just another sandbagged dot on some Army general's grid map. But it does look mean. Nothing human could ever survive its firepower: long-range artillery on call, air strikes on call, mortar shells, howitzer shells from tube-sighted 105s, .50-caliber machine guns, antipersonnel mines, Claymore mines, thirty yards of leg-ripping barbed wire secured by engineer's stakes and festooned with trip flares, and a thick wall of sandbags which will be illuminated by a golden string of muzzle flashes from automatic rifles.

But so far the compound has been silent. No one awake except a few drowsy sentries I've bored with my political speech.

As silent as ghosts, the sappers go in, calm and professional, their minds focused to a burning point, their naked bodies covered with grease and smeared with charcoal. Each sapper has spent his final hours alone, deep in the jungle, building his own coffin and writing his name on his coffin with mud. A hundred yards from the wire the sappers lie down and then crawl

forward on their bellies, into the black barbs of the concertina wire, armed only with wire cutters.

Close behind, the second wave of sappers drag bangalore torpedoes into position. A third wave waits in the shadows with satchel charges strapped to their backs.

While the sappers are cutting the wire, illumination shells from a mortars section inside the compound burst overhead, lighting up the battlefield, just a routine periodic illumination.

The light from the flares catches the second wave of sappers in the open and half of them are cut down as sentries in the compound open fire. The surviving sappers run into the wire, shove bamboo bangalore torpedoes up into the wire as far as they can, then, lying next to them, detonate them.

While the Nungs inside the compound watch the sappers blow themselves up in the wire, the third wave attacks. The sappers who are not killed fall down and pretend to be dead. Under fire, they wait.

Someone gives an order, "Sung coi!"--"Mortars."

The assault troops advance aggressively. Each fighter carries one mortar shell and drops it into a mortar tube as he passes. All along the edge of the jungle, mortar tubes tonk, and the first wave of assault troops charges forward.

By the time the mortar shells dropped into the tubes by the first wave of assault troops arch in and bang somewhere inside the compound, the enemy mortar crews inside the compound are already dropping shell after shell into their own mortar tubes--thump-thump-thump--

illumination rounds shot out, followed by H. E.--high explosives.

"DAI LIEN!"--"Machine guns!" The jungle sparkles with green tracers, going out.

Our first mortar shells fall short and kill our own troops. The range on the mortar tubes is adjusted.

The compound perimeter opens up with everything in the world that shoots. Muzzle flashes wink like fireflies. The Chien Si human wave attack advances, not returning fire.

An enemy grenade bursts ten yards from where I lie with Master Sergeant Xuan's reserve force. We do not return fire.

"XUNG PHONG!" is the order, and the second wave of assault troops echoes back in unison:

"XUNG PHONG! XUNG PHONG! XUNG PHONG!"--"Assault! Assault! Assault!"

The Liberation Army attacks, a fearless horde of shadows.

Moments after the first wave of assault troops has been shot to pieces the second wave hits the wire.

The sappers with satchel charges now rise up as one man, pull fuses, and fling heavy canvas blocks of TNT into the perimeter bunkers. A few of the sappers are shot down before they can throw, but all of them are shot down after they throw.

As the satchel charges lift the bunkers up in slow motion, spilling sand in sheets as sandbags burst and sandbag walls are blown apart, the second wave is coming through the wire, walking on bloody stepping-stones that are the backs of dead comrade-soldiers.

Our mortars do not lift their fire until our assault troops are being wounded by our own shrapnel.

The third wave advances into the gray cloud of smoke boiling across the compound. All we can see now are the blue and orange flashes of RPGs--rocket-propelled grenades.

Inside the compound the fight is a noisy toe-to-toe show-down of hot-blooded man-killing. It is over very quickly. One minute they're overrunning the wire, the next minute they are grenading the bunkers.

Someone blows a whistle and the Liberation Army pulls out without hesitation, leaving the Special Forces compound blown up and on fire, leaving the Nungs and the Green Beanies and their spook bosses overrun and fucked up totally.

The rear-guard reserve under Master Sergeant Xuan holds its position while hundreds of fighters of the Liberation Army flow past in the returning darkness. Wounded fighters limp along on crude, freshly cut crutches. Friends haul dead comrades away by the wire loops on their ankles.

Life in the shit is a rush, but you come down hard. After thirty minutes in a firefight you feel like you've pulled a double shift at the coal mine. Everybody's ass is dragging.

In the safety of the jungle the fighters call out the names of their units to one another in the darkness, and the attack force breaks up and reassembles into small local units for the march home.

The rear-guard unit waits for an attack from the compound, or the arrival of a reaction force from another command. But the only movement inside the compound is a lone figure, stumbling around blindly, calling for help in that unknown language sometimes invented by dying men.

Our scouts report that a reaction force is ten minutes away. Moments later, an avalanche of bombs and shells hits the fields of fire from the direction of our attack, while we in the rear-guard withdraw in the opposite direction.

In the jungle I see Song squatting beside the trail, trying to bandage her hand. Battle Mouth is with her, but is of no help; he appears to be in shock.

I squat down and look at Song's hand. A piece of shrapnel is embedded in the loose flesh between thumb and forefinger. The shrapnel is a shark's tooth of steel, black and silver, and the wound is oozing red blood.

I search until I find Bo Doi Bac Si.

Bo Doi Bac Si sponges the wound clean, then clamps down on the piece of shrapnel with shiny little pliers. Song grits her teeth and whimpers. I hold her wounded hand steady and Bo Doi Bac Si pulls out the jagged chunk of metal. Bo Doi Bac Si bandages the hand quickly and hurries off to help the other wounded, handing me a tiny blue and white tube of ointment

"for her cuts."

I wash Song's legs and feet with water from my canteen.

I wipe the deep cuts clean with her black and white checkered Front bandanna. I massage greasy yellow ointment into deep ugly gouges left by barbed wire.

As I bandage Song's legs and feet with captured battle dressings, four American prisoners are led past us on their way to the Hanoi Hilton. Their hands are bound behind their backs with wire and they are roped together neck to neck. The prisoners stumble and collide. They see me. They stare back at me in stunned disbelief as they are led away. The first two prisoners are Special Forces officers. The last two are both over forty, wearing new jungle utilities with no markings or insignia, both of them too pale and too beefy to be lifer light colonels. I've seen men like this before: spooks. Errand boys playing God. They look at me like they've seen a ghost.

I help Song to her feet and we listen. When we bear calls of "Hoa Binh!" we rejoin Commander Be Dan and the Hoa Binh fighters.

Our casualties have been light. One of the Nguyen brothers, Nguyen Ba, is dead, his body blown to bits, vaporized. Another of the Nguyen brothers, Nguyen Mot, is unconscious in a hammock being carried by the Phuong twins. His right arm is off at the elbow and the stump has been neatly bandaged. The third Nguyen brother, Nguyen Hai, walks beside the hammock and holds his brother's hand.

After a lot of loud and forceful persuasion I finally motivate Battle Mouth to move down the trail. Battle Mouth is a zombie with a near-terminal case of the thousand-yard stare.

Commander Be Dan and I lift Song onto a hammock and carry her.

As dawn comes up on the outside world, we fade away, deep into the triple-canopy jungle, where it is night, where it is always night.

Deep in the steaming wet darkness of the rain forest we emerge from a shadow-shrouded path onto a riverbank. In the river's foul-smelling water, bullfrogs croak-croak and plop, unseen.

Through the ground mist moves a phantom giant, an artillery piece being hauled away on the back of an elephant.

We hear voices and the sounds of men digging in the earth.

It begins to rain. The raindrops thump the black earth and big jungle plants brush against our hands and faces. The jungle plants are wet and shiny in the moonlight and movement makes them look like living things. Through holes in the triple canopy we glimpse a dirty lemon moon. We can see clouds and a black metal sky.

We trudge past an ancient, crumbling pagoda, Buddhist temple ruins built by men who kicked the living shit out of Kublai Khan and his Golden Hordes. In the darkness the pagoda is bone white. The broken walls are being swallowed up by creeping jungle vines. Inside the pagoda, in a bed of red roofing tiles, sits a bronze Buddha, green with age and corroded, fat-bellied and smiling.

A stairway of stone leads down from the pagoda into the river. Tired soldiers of the Liberation Army, bare-chested and bony-kneed, like muddy skeletons, squat on the cracked stone steps, black string tied to their thumbs, fishing.

Down along the riverbank men and women are laughing. Lanterns bounce as hungry Front fighters, spearing giant bullfrogs, splash and fall.

Walking-wounded fighters bow and offer us frog soup orbarbecued frogs' legs, hot and fragrant in bamboo bowls. Smiling, flashing gold teeth, they dangle living bullfrogs in front of our faces. The bullfrogs are pale green; their legs have been tied together with black string and they are as big as cannonballs.

We bow and say "thank you" to our comrade brothers and sisters, but march on, thinking only about how eager we are to be back in our home village where we can stand in our own fields.

Beyond the pagoda fifty teenaged farmers, strong young men and women, are hard at work, chopping soggy clods of cold mud out of the jungle floor with hoes, then planting the red seeds of the future into rich black soil without saying goodbye.

Feeling the weight of the darkness, we follow Commander Be Dan, ignoring sore muscles and pain and the thoughts of our dead and wounded, and ignoring our need to sleep. We are bones clothed in shadows and we are going home.

Behind us in the steaming night rain a tired and hungry people are burying their dead in graves by the river.

Heading home from the attack on the Special Forces compound, we walk for a week, sleeping during the day, too tired to talk, until we come to the river crossing where we met the blind barge man. The ferry barge has been burned and sunk, a block of charcoal like a five-ton bar of black soap dissolving in the water.

We search the riverbank for a safe crossing, without luck.

We see the rotting carcass of a water buffalo in a mud hole. The black mass smells horrible and is alive with maggots and flies.

We hide in tunnels until noon, the safest part of the day. Nguyen Mot is dying, we think, and Song is half out of her head with fever. Song objects to a daylight crossing. Commander Be Dan decides to risk a daylight crossing, which surprises everyone.

Master Sergeant Xuan returns from scouting and leads us to a pontoon bridge. We crawl through reeds and watch Arvin puppet troops on the opposite bank of the river. The puppet troops are laying shiny new barbed wire. The barbed wire has shiny sharp teeth. The Arvin snuffies are not working very hard. One Arvin holds an engineer stake in place while another pounds on it listlessly with a sledgehammer.

The bridge security sentries are relaxing in hammocks, protected from the hot sun by canvas slung on clothesline like miniature Arab tents. Four Arvins are on the bridge, throwing a bright orange Frisbee and giggling at bad catches, drafted peasant boys who can't read and who don't know which end of a gun the bullets come out of, all four of them talking nonstop.

They haven't got any heavy guns in yet, no M-60, no mortar tubes, and they can't set Claymore mines until they've finished stringing wire. Nobody looks like an officer. There are no American advisers.

"BAN!" says the Commander, and the fighters open fire.

At the sound of firing, Song gets up off the hammock we've been carrying her in and picks up her pea-green Swedish K submachine gun. She resists my attempts to make her lie back down so violently that I don't try to stop her.

The Frisbee players are all cut down. The wire stringers are hit and the wounded start screaming.

Master Sergeant Xuan fires an RPG at the tarpaulin and it is blown apart.

There is no return fire.

The Commander calls out to the puppet troops across the river, "BUONG SUN XUONG!"--

"Brothers, lay down your guns!"

But the surviving Arvins are already too far away to hear him. The puppet troops don't lay down their weapons, they throw them down and run like hell. Arvins know how to run, especially if it's at night and they're on guard duty. Big Sale Today: Arvin Rifles!--never fired and only dropped once.

The only sound is the whining of one of the Frisbee players, shot in the stomach, as he tries to pull the pin on a hand grenade.

Commander Be Dan gives us a hand signal: Tien! Mao!

We run across the pontoon bridge, a span of perforated steel planking American military engineers put together from a kit.

Song shoots the wounded Frisbee player in the face. The round takes off the top of his head.

On the other side of the river we turn left and run past the stacked coils of barbed wire and two dead Arvins. Enemy weapons are picked up. We run along the riverbank and head for a treeline.

Master Sergeant Xuan and I drop back as rear guards, even though we still have not taken any fire from the puppet troops and don't expect to.

The Phuong twins move fast, carrying Nguyen Mot on a hammock, protected by Nguyen Hai.

Bo Doi Bac Si and Battle Mouth help Song, who is straggling.

Commander Be Dan says, "Mao! Mao! Truc Thang!"--"Hurry, helicopters!" He drops back to protect the unit.

We are fifty yards from the treeline when a Huey gunship zooms in upon us with an ear-numbing roar. The Huey is olive drab, round and awkward-looking, but fast, a big mechanical dragonfly with men inside, floating in the air, spitting fire.

Master Sergeant Xuan aims an RPG at the gunship but is hit before he can fire.

Commander Be Dan returns fire while I double-time back to help Master Sergeant Xuan.

The Huey swings around and makes another gun-run, fires a cluster of pod rockets. As the rockets slant in on us we open our mouths to ease the pressure our eardrums may suffer from the shock waves of concussion.

I crawl to Master Sergeant Xuan. Half of his face has been blown off. He tries to speak, but he can't make his mouth move. I try to pull the RPG from his hands, but he won't let go. I put my foot against his chest and push. Finally Sergeant Master Xuan lets go of his weapon, but only because he is dead.

As the chopper swings around for another pass, Bo Doi Bac Si appears, firing his folding-stock M-1 carbine.

I pick up the RPG launcher--I'm going to need it.

I run to Commander Be Dan. He has been shot in the neck and one of his ears has been blown off. His AK-47 assault rifle has been hit. One round has torn open the rust-brown metal of the banana clip, exposing a row of bullets like sharp golden teeth.

The Commander looks up at me, trying to read his medical condition in my eyes. He reaches up to touch the bloody shreds on the side of his head where his ear used to be, and groans.

The gunbird comes in low, machine gunning us with electronically timed three-second bursts.

The chopper pilot is high on war. He's already patting himself on the back for a job well done. The chopper hovers over us, a bloated green vulture, a swooping, chattering, metal carrion bird, rotor blades hacking like motorized machetes.

Flat on my back, playing dead, I see bloodred circles stenciled with black widow spiders. I can see the pilot's face before he drops his sun visor and squeezes his thumb on the red firing button on the toggle switch. The pilot is an up-and-coming young executive in the biggest corporation the world has ever seen, and through his gunsights people on the ground are not human beings at all but are only As running toward his report card.

Bo Doi Bac Si runs, drawing fire.

The Huey takes the bait, rolls slightly to starboard.

Commander Be Dan picks up the B-40, fires the rocket, then collapses. The RPG swooshes from the end of the launcher like a tiny space ship and the door gunner inside the chopper sees it coming a fraction of a second before it hits the gunship.

The fuel cell explodes. Rockets and ammunition cook off and secondary explosions rip the chopper apart.

The gunship comes straight down. It just drops, fire falling out of the sky trailing black smoke. The Huey splatters across the deck as an ugly smear of torn metal and burning gasoline, rotor blade bent, fuselage split open. The men inside burn in their machine.

The Phuong twins have come back to fight. They put the commander, who is unconscious, onto a hammock, sling their rifles over their backs, and lift him up.

"Tien!" I say, and we all head for the treeline.

Two more choppers are coming in fast, half a mile away.

Bo Doi Bac Si drops back to cover us until we are safely within the treeline.

I think about making a run for it, but where would I go? A chopper is down. The angry choppers coming in are going to kill anybody on the ground on sight at five hundred yards.

We're all deep inside a tunnel when the gunships rumble over the treeline. The gunships buzz in tight circles while door gunners pour bullets down hot and heavy, firing without a target, trying to shoot down the jungle

itself. We listen to the choppers making themselves crazy and firing up pods full of rockets for a long time.

We sit in the tunnel until night comes, listening to ourselves breathe. The air is so thin that one of the Phuong twins faints and has to be revived. This tunnel is not used regularly anymore and the drainage sumps are clogged and overflowing. We're trapped in a black hole in the ground and we are wet and miserable.

When it's night we crawl out of the stinking pit and stand up, breathing deeply and coughing, mud-people in the moonlight.

I walk point. The Phuong twins carry Nguyen Mot. Nguyen Hai and Bo Doi Bac Si carry Song. Commander Be Dan insists on walking, so I give him Battle Mouth to lean on.

Limping forward, I wave my hand. "Tien, Dong Chi"--"Forward, comrade sisters," I say to the tired, pretty Phuong twins.

And then I lead the fighters back to the village.

A week after the victory of the Nung combat fortress, life in the village of Hoa Binh is back to normal except that now I am not treated as a prisoner of war but as a trusted Viet Cong soldier. I'm halfway home.

I'm working in the rice fields with the people when Song comes running to get me. I'm wiping the sweat from my face with a black-and-white checkered Front fighter's bandanna, which was awarded to me formally by Ba Can Bo in front of the whole village.

My next step to freedom: earn a weapon.

"Follow me," Song says. "Di di Mau"--"Go fast."

Confused, I drop my rice sickle and bundle of rice stalks onto the paddy dike. I follow Song, double-timing.

The rice threshers raking mounds of unhusked paddy in the village common freeze when they hear the sounds of approaching helicopters.

Song and I hide in a tunnel under General Fang Cat's "office."

General Fang Cat is a Nguy, a "puppet soldier" in the Arvins, the army without a country, a Vichy zip with a sense of humor. His "office" is the fieldstone foundation of what was once the finest hooch in the village. The hooch was blown up by the General's cannons. General Fang Cat never negotiates a business deal until he has made certain that everyone understands his terms.

Song crawls deeper into the tunnel and brings back an AK-47 assault rifle. She chambers a round.

We wait.

Once a month General Fang Cat visits to pick up his Tien ca phe--his "coffee money." In America we would call it grease, a bribe.

Hoa Binh lies within the General's Tactical Area of Responsibility. Marines cannot enter the General's TAOR without his permission. In his monthly Hamlet Evaluation Reports, General Fang Cat lists Hoa Binh as a leper colony and the area around the village as one hundred percent pacified. His reports look good on paper and make a lot of other people look good, so everybody is happy.

While we wait in the tunnel, Song tells me about the old province chief, Colonel Chu, who announced his visits to the village by dropping captured Chien Si fighters out of his helicopter--alive.

One day Colonel Chu's puppet soldiers took ten men from the village, bound them, and laid them in a row in the road. Colonel Chu drove a truck toward them as they struggled frantically against their bonds. He ran over them, smashing all of their heads.

Colonel Chu and his soldiers routinely raped the women of the village and any who resisted were sent away to rot in tiger cages as Tran Cong--"Communist sympathizers."

Front agents in Quang Tri booby-trapped Colonel Chu's private toilet with a dud howitzer shell.

Colonel Chu flushed himself right out of being a problem.

General Fang Cat is not an evil or sadistic man, only greedy, corrupt, ambitious, and realistic.

His worst flaw is that he is constantly plotting coups against the Saigon government. If he were arrested during a coup, his replacement would be poorer than the General, more hungry.

The General is "full." He has been successfully corrupt and powerful for so long that his greed has lost its edge.

We hear the crunch of boots in broken roofing tile. We see an Arvin snuffy, then another.

General Fang Cat's Arvin bodyguards pull their M-16s around by the barrels, butts dragging in the dirt.

Song takes aim at the puppet armymen.

"What are you doing here?" I say.

Song says, "Security."

"So what am I doing here?" I say.

Song says, "Uncle does not trust Dai Tuong Fang Cat. And Commander Be Dan does not trust you. You might defect. Maybe the Black Rifles pay the puppets beaucoup money for you."

We watch. As General Fang Cat struts onto the ruined foundation, Song sights him in.

Dai Tuong Fang Cat greets the Woodcutter with a smile. He obviously likes to smile because it gives him a chance to show off his gold eyeteeth.

"Chao ong, Dai Tuong Fang Cat," says the Woodcutter, bowing.

"Kinh Chao ong," says General Fang Cat, bowing. "Greetings, honored sir."

General Fang Cat is tall and slender and wearing a starched tiger-striped fatigue uniform, with a shoeboxful of medals, badges, and insignia on his chest. He's wearing cowboy holsters with a matched set of jade-handled chrome-plated .38-caliber revolvers.

The General and the Woodcutter sit in bamboo chairs in the center of the leveled foundation.

The Woodcutter gives the General a small red envelope. The General nods, smiles.

General Fang Cat complains that he needs more money. The Americans have begun to question his battle reports. Battle reports are required to conceal his losses due to desertion.

A lot of General Fang Cat's troops buy their way out of the Army with forged medical discharges. Of course, all of these soldiers are still listed on the rolls so that General Fang Cat can continue to collect their pay and their rations.

The three million piasters the General owes for the office of province chief has to be paid, plus the one million piasters he owes for his general's stars. The Woodcutter is an honorable man, says the General, and will understand the necessity to pay one's debts. Without additional money he's not sure how long he can go on generating the large volume of paperwork required to keep the village of Hoa Binh safely out of the war.

Because of his desperate need for money, the General is now forced to desperate measures, which include selling ammunition, C-rations, and even

medical supplies to his own troops.

The General points out that he does not allow his troops to rape the village women. His men do not steal chickens or pigs. And none of the young men of the village have been press-ganged into the Army.

The General no longer feels the need to blow up Hoa Binh with his cannons to win medals.

He has lost interest in medals and has stopped buying them. Now all he wants is to save enough money to take his family to Paris, drink vintage wine, and have French servants for the rest of his life.

General Fang Cat's philosophy is live and let live, as long as he gets his end of the deal in cash.

The Woodcutter listens politely, then says, "One hundred American dollars. And we will not fight in your region."

The General says, "Five hundred."

"One hundred."

"Five hundred and your village is safe."

"One hundred," says the Woodcutter, "and you may defecate successfully. "

General Fang Cat laughs. "Yes, Colonel Chu, my old commander. What a leech he was. He died rich."

The Woodcutter nods. "Yet even the poorest peasant may defecate successfully without the fear that he is sitting on angry explosives. "

General Fang Cat thinks about it, nodding. He slaps his hands together. "One hundred," he says. "For now."

The Woodcutter raises his hand and the Phuong twins bring a pot of green tea and two bamboo cups.

As they drink tea, General Fang Cat explains to the Woodcutter that he understands the Woodcutter's position regarding the underaged half-white girls being forced to work as whores in the village of Khe Sanh. Families with half-white girls who resist are denounced under the CIA's Phoenix Program and

"eliminated." The General wants only for the Woodcutter to understand clearly that the General has no control over the Americans and is in no way involved in or responsible for this crime against the people.

The Woodcutter listens closely, then nods. "You will not be harmed. We have had word from the forests. We know that you are not involved. A

decision has been made in the forests and this problem will soon be resolved."

General Fang Cat relaxes, sips his tea.

The two men drink tea in silence.

"It is a bad thing," says the General, "when the Long Noses make whores of our children."

The Woodcutter says, "Yes."

"The Americans," says General Fang Cat, and puts down his teacup.

"Yes," says the Woodcutter, not looking at the General. "The Americans."

An hour after General Fang Cat's chopper has faded into the purple horizon the Woodcutter and I are fishing, hauling black nets from the river.

A short round comes in, bam.

The fireball explodes into long streamers, a spider of thick white smoke as big as a house.

Hissing splinters of phosphorus sputter through the air trailing white plumes.

It's a short round of Willy Peter--white phosphorus. The stink of white phosphorus is distinctive and not easy to forget.

A burning child comes running. Her clothes have been burned from her body. Her face is all open mouth and animal eyes. It is Le Thi, Song's star pupil and teacber's pet. The little girl claws at her burning flesh, digging for fire with her fingers. Her attempts to brush the Willy Peter off only spreads it and ignites it.

By the time we get to her she is holding her arms away from her body, afraid to touch herself.

She's screaming non-stop. Her face is twisted into something ugly by the pain. Her body heat ignites the splinters of white phosphorus and the air feeds it. The splinters burn through flesh, sizzling until they hit bone.

The Woodcutter and I grab Le Thi as she tries to slap paddy water onto her wounds. She fights us. The Woodcutter tries to hold her down, but she is a wildcat. I punch her in the side of the head with the meaty side of my fist, just enough to knock her unconscious.

The Woodcutter lifts Le Thi and lays her down gently on the paddy dike.

We work quickly, covering each smoldering wound in her flesh with black paddy mud. The mud cuts off the oxygen and the Willy Peter stops burning.

It's all over, just that fast. I feel sick.

The trail watchers have seen the white smoke from the shell and the village gong is bonging out an alarm.

As we walk down the paddy dike, with Le Thi in my arms, we are met by the whole village.

A woman squats on the paddy dike and wails in agony and continues to wail and the sound of it is physically painful.

Bo Doi Bac Si pushes forward with his medical kit.

But Le Thi is dead. There is nothing anyone can do.

Later that day, the village prepares for a funeral.

They lay Le Thi in a quach, a child's coffin of fresh yellow pinewood.

The Woodcutter does not attend the funeral. As Song and I leave the hooch, the Woodcutter says curtly that Tiger Eye, the Commander of the Western Region, has ordered him on an important mission and will I go with him and fight, yes or no.

"I will fight, Uncle."

The Woodcutter nods. He focuses all of his attention on a toy rifle he is carving from a scrap of bamboo. He does not look up.

Song and I go to the hooch of Le Thi's family. After a simple ceremony at the altar of the ancestors the funeral procession moves to the family burial plot in the village cemetery.

We bury Le Thi in the cold black ground and we say goodbye.

Le Thi's mother tries to climb down into the grave and has to be restrained.

After the funeral, when the villagers have returned to the village, Song stands by the grave, very straight, like a soldier standing at attention, and cries, without making a sound, her whole face covered by her hands.

A week after we bury Le Thi the whole village comes together once again, only this time for a happier occasion, the long-awaited wedding between the Phuong twins and the two surviving Nguyen brothers.

I don't want to go to the wedding, but Song nags me into submission. Maybe she thinks that if I see a wedding I might want to be in one of my own.

Song and I stroll through the cool night air to the hooch of the Nguyen family. We hear soft laughter and happy people talking.

Inside the hooch, candles flicker in the main room and music fills the air.

We are greeted by the elder Nguyen, a dignified little old man who bows and welcomes us to his home. We return the bow and Song gives him a red envelope containing a small amount of money. Song thanks him for inviting us.

We sit. We eat pork, vegetables, fruit, rice wine, and sweet cakes. We drink green tea.

Everything smells good and tastes better.

The party lasts all night. Some of us fall asleep. Some take naps and wake up to rejoin the party with renewed energy.

We are greeted at dawn by the Nguyen brothers, Mot and Hai. One sleeve of Mot's traditional high-collared blue silk tunic has been pinned neatly over the stub of the arm he lost at the victorious battle for the Nung combat fortress, where his brother Ba was killed.

When the elder Nguyen gives us the signal we begin the procession to the home of the Phuong twins.

Everyone is dressed to kill. The parade up the paddy dike is bizarrely festive when contrasted with our usual drab clothing. My Sunday suit is hanging in my closet in my room back in Alabama. But my black pajama outfit is enhanced considerably by the red silk sash Song made for me.

At the Phuong house the best men present the father of the brides with gifts of rice wine and a chocolate-brown teakwood tray filled with areca nuts and betel leaves.

We are invited inside.

The tray is placed as an offering at the altar of the ancestors. Red candles are lit and prayers for the ancestors are recited.

The Nguyen brothers bow to the ancestral altar, and to the elder Phuong, who bows and grins and seems a little soft in the head, and then they bow to the mother of the brides, who is very happy, maybe even happier than the brides themselves.

Then the Nguyen brothers and their best men go to meet the Phuong twins.

The guests drink tea and chat until the brides and grooms return to the main room together, beaming with happiness.

All of the guests join in the procession back to the groom's house.

Back at the Nguyen hooch the brides and grooms bow to the altar that honors the spirit of the soil, of Xa, the land, which is alive. They hold burning joss sticks and ask for permission to enter the house.

The brides and grooms spend a long time bowing to each and every one of their relatives. It reminds me of Decoration Day back in Alabama, when all of your cousins and aunts and uncles that you don't know are trying to introduce themselves to you all at the same time. As Old Ma, my grandmother, would say, these people got so many kin it would take a team of Philadelphia lawyers to untangle the roots of their family trees.

On the way home I am careful not to be caught up into any of Song's comments about how wonderful married life must be. She's shy, but I know that she's secretly crazy about me.

Maybe when I escape I can take her with me. If not, I can always send for her later.

When Song and I get married back in the World, she will want to buy color televisions and ruby rings and washing machines. She'll get her hair fixed at a fancy beauty parlor twice a week and will get fat and will lie around in bed all day, watching soap operas on TV, eating bon-bons and yelling at the maids, like in a horror movie.

After the wedding I go back to our hooch. Song goes to visit her best friend, the pregnant Fighter-Widow.

I'm squatting on my reed sleeping mat, using my rice sickle to cut myself a new pair of B.F.

Goodrich sandals. I'm hacking away at a chunk of truck tire Johnny Be Cool found on the wreck of a six-by that hit a land mine out on the road.

Without warning I am knocked over by concussion shock waves and a black comet hits the earth.

The sky is falling and the whole world is blowing up. I feel like a New Guy at Khe Sanh under his first bad incoming. Except that I have experienced this kind of incoming before.

Nobody makes artillery shells big enough to make the earth bounce. It's an arc-light, a B-52

attack.

Lake-bombs fall five miles from Boeing Stratofortress strategic bombers that fly too high to be heard, three planes to a flight, carrying 60 tons of high-explosive bombs. American bombers are making toothpicks of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, vaporizing teak trees as tall as New York skyscrapers and as old as Jesus Christ. The bomb run will leave a swath of cratered badlands a mile long. As great blocks of sound are cracked by power, the impacting of the bombs overlaps into rolling thunder, not simply a sound but a hard wall of noise moving across the face of the earth like an iron glacier, a sonic roar that can tear out a man's eardrums at one thousand meters.

I yell, "MAY BAY GIAC MY!"--"American pirate planes!"

I run for the family bunker. But Johnny Be Cool is trying to pull his water bo into the water bo's bunker. I stop to help, knowing that Johnny Be Cool is too stubborn to go into the family bunker until his water bo is safe.

The water bo is stubborn too, a lumbering giant with a look of being unbelievably stupid, just like a cow back in Alabama if the cows were built like dinosaurs. Johnny Be Cool pulls on the bo's brass nose ring while I kick the gray-black monster in the ass.

We grunt and groan.

Acres of virgin forests are flying on the horizon.

Finally I do a quick comparison of weights and dimensions and grab hold of Johnny Be Cool.

I pick him up and carry him, kicking and screaming, to the family bunker.

Song is waiting for us outside our family bunker. She says, "Come, Bao Chi, my brother. My friend is having her baby and she wants you to be here."

Inside our family bunker the Fighter-Widow is in labor. The bunker smells of alcohol and is lit by four kerosene lamps. A camouflage parachute has been hung on the ceiling of the small chamber. The Fighter-Widow is lying on her back on a straw-filled mattress.

The Fighter-Widow groans, in pain, and there's blood. She looks like someone who has been gutshot. Bo Doi Bac Si is delivering the baby, assisted by the Broom-Maker.

The Fighter-Widow sees me. In the worst throes of her labor pains she glares at me, fiercely, glowing with pride. She's telling me with her black

eyes that she has survived the cruelty of the Black Rifles, who shove electric light bulbs into the vaginas of Vietnamese women and break them so that the women cannot give birth to Viet Cong babies. She groans again, swallows a scream. She's sweating. The baby is coming out.

The Fighter-Widow watches me with intensity as she fills the rocking tunnel with the joy in her eyes. As bombs weighing a ton each jolt dust from the roof of the bunker, the Fighter-Widow grunts her Viet Cong baby into the world an inch at a time, still staring at me, fighting me with her belly, gripping in one white-knuckled hand a small white plaster bust of Ho Chi Minh. In her other hand she holds the toy bamboo rifle carved by the Woodcutter.

Johnny Be Cool wipes the Fighter-Widow's face with a damp cloth, then squeezes a few drops of water from the cloth onto her lips.

Song squats next to her friend, trying to comfort her. Song is trembling. She rocks back and forth to ride out the pounding of the B-52 bombs. Her black pajama trousers are stained--

Song has wet her pants.

I say, touching Song's shoulder, "Coso khong?"--"Are you afraid?" Song looks up at me, smiles, nods.

The Black Rifles shot the Fighter-Widow's husband, so she took his place in the ranks.

Giving birth to this baby means that she has replaced the dead Front fighter two for one. And it's a tribal event; the child is the future of the village.

With a fierce grunt of ecstasy the Fighter-Widow fires her Chien Si baby at me like a greasy pink mortar shell.

The baby takes one breath and then starts crying. Song says, "It's a boy!"

Song lifts the fat, bald, oily-red Communist baby, but the Fighter-Widow turns her face away, afraid to look at the baby, afraid because of the smoke American pirate planes spray into the treetops to kill the jungle. Vietnamese mothers fear the two-heads-no-arms babies. Some two-heads-no-arms babies have flippers instead of arms, or two bodies attached to one head, or sometimes they are born with their hearts outside their bodies. Sometimes other things happen, things implied by looks and grimaces, things so hideous that no one is willing to describe them.

The baby bellows out a hearty squall, and everyone is relieved. Song lays the baby on the mother's breast and speaks to the mother softly. The Fighter-Widow unbuttons her black blouse, pulls it aside, and gives her heavy breast to the baby. The hungry baby suckles mother's milk from the dark brown nipple. As the mother nurses her baby she sings a little song into the baby's ear.

Silence falls across the village.

Now that the bombing has ended, Commander Be Dan arrives with fighters to carry the Fighter-Widow back to her own hooch.

Before they carry her out, the Fighter-Widow offers the toy bamboo rifle to the baby. A tiny hand grips the white wood. The baby swings the toy rifle back and forth, then puts it into his mouth.

Commander Be Dan grunts his approval and the Front fighters laugh and cheer.

The Fighter-Widow laughs. She holds the baby up so that everyone can see. "B-Nam Hai,"

she says, naming the baby.

Song takes the baby as the Front fighters lift the mother onto a hammock. Song kisses the baby and says, "B-Nam Hai."

"B-Nam Hai," echo the fighters, laughing as they carry the VC widow out into the sunlight.

Outside, Bo Doi Bac Si calls me over and I help him treat some of the village trail watchers who have stumbled in from the edge of the strike zone, ears and noses bleeding, some even bleeding from their eyes.

Then I head back toward the hooch, knowing that Song will be there, working on my disguise for my new mission, and knowing that she will insist that I try it on for her for her approval.

"B-Nam Hai," I say to myself as I walk back to the hooch alone. B-Nam Hai--"B-52."

I march into the village of Khe Sanh in the late afternoon wearing Song's clever disguise.

Commander Be Dan and the Woodcutter are with me. The Nguyen brothers and the Phuong twins, the newlyweds, are traveling with us, but at a distance.

I am thrown a few sloppy salutes by half a squad of Army pukes who are drunk, laughing, loaded with money, and out for a skivvy run to Beaver

Cleaver's popular steam-and-cream in the part of the village of Khe Sanh that we call Sin City.

Enjoying my new status as an officer, I crank off a crisp salute.

Suddenly four black Marine grunts stumble out of a gook shop and into our path, four big bruisers. Surely somewhere in this world there must be some small-or at least regular-size-black guys, but you never see any of them in the Marine Corps.

For a few moments we intermingle with the black grunts. I turn my face away, afraid I might be recognized, and then we'll all be playing gunfight at the O.K. Corral for real. I'm sure that I can actually hear the vibrating tension in Commander Be Dan's trigger finger.

But all the black leathernecks see is an Army Captain, with shiny chrome railroad tracks on his collar lapels. All they see is some silly pogue brass in a clean set of stateside utilities, with black leather combat boots--spit-shined--and a .45-caliber automatic pistol in a black leather shoulder holster. There is a clip in the pistol, but they can't see that there are no bullets in the clip--Commander Be Dan sort of insisted.

I am an Army Captain, escorting a Viet Cong suspect, a harmless-looking old papa-san with his hands tied behind his back. I'm being assisted by an Arvin Ranger Lieutenant. The Lieutenant is armed with an old Thompson submachine gun and is missing a hand.

The black grunts do not bother to salute me, the shitbirds. I feel like writing their asses up on charges for their lack of military courtesy.

The black grunts carry their M-16s slung over their shoulders, but locked and loaded. They carefully scan the face of every civilian. They look for the glint of an AK-47 in any unfriendly eye.

Our guide, a Front liaison agent, appears, a smiling teenaged girl in green shorts, no shoes, and a ragged old khaki shirt with tarnished eagles on the collar lapels--the rank insignia of a full bull, a Marine colonel. The girl's right knee is a deformed mass laced in red with crude surgical scars. She does not greet us, does not even approach us. She ignores us. She limps along at a brisk pace, ten yards ahead of us, carrying a big bundle of dirty laundry balanced on her head.

The village of Khe Sanh has swollen in size since my last skivvy run. It's a circus of chattering cyclo drivers, three-wheeled Lambrettas, street beggars, and children of all ages.

Pathetic refugees squat inside shelters constructed from stolen plywood, stolen cardboard, and stolen canvas. But there are not as many American troops on deck as there were in the good old bad old days. Since Khe Sanh Combat Base was abandoned, the only American personnel in this Tactical Area of Responsibility are from smaller garrisons at landing zones and firebases.

We follow the liaison agent through the village black market. Here ambitious capitalists who talk fast and travel light hawk stolen military equipment and PX stock off muddy ponchos spread on the ground: C-rations, Kodak Instamatic cameras, Coco-Puffs breakfast cereal, and expensive Hong Kong watches that wholesale for two dollars a dozen.

Two Arvin sergeants from the loot-now, fight-later army are haggling with an old mama-san over the price of a brass statue of the Buddhist goddess of mercy which has been cast from a melted-down howitzer shell casing. The old mama-san referees the fight by punching at both men with little bony fists, talking nonstop and threatening deadly violence. She's a real tough old broad.

An old man wearing an Australian bush hat steps into my path. He flashes toothless gums and laughs like a crazy man. There are ugly scars all over his neck. The crazy man swats a fly from his face and goes on laughing, a weird, gurgling laugh. He is the world's easiest audience, easy to please, but all the time he's glaring at me in the special way the villagers of Hoa Binh glared at me for the first year of my captivity, with that same combination of fear, fascination, and deadly intent, as though I'm not a human being at all, but some exotic venomous snake.

The crazy man holds out a small glass Buddha and flashes three fingers; thirty piasters. He makes ugly noises deep in his throat as though he's trying to talk.

The laughing crazy man is shoved aside rudely by a strangely seductive, strikingly sexy teenaged girl wearing a black eye patch. The girl has a slender body but comically oversized breasts. Her bosoms are vast and bloated, protruding ahead of her like the prows of black battleships. She is dressed all in black and has a black shawl over her head.

Behind the beautiful girl, silent and unnoticed, a little boy barely old enough to walk clings to the girl's black pajama trousers leg with a tiny fist, while she tugs him around, seeming not to notice that he is there.

The girl talks nonstop in pidgin English. "You. You. Boom-boom picture you? You buy.

You. You buy. You buy now, okay?" And then she pulls a dirty picture book out of her bra.

"You buy now." She flips the pages in front of my face. The photographs in the book substantiate in no uncertain terms the eternal undying love between women and biker gangs, women and women, and women and Danish farm animals.

I shake my head and wave her off, arrogantly, an officer, a Roman centurion dismissing the rabble in the provinces. My dream girl has turned out to be just another flat-chested hustler with a brassiere stuffed full of Tijuana Bibles. The story of my life. "Di di, mau len," I say--

"Go away."

Our guide with the laundry on her head pauses in front of Beaver Cleaver's steam-and-cream, just for an instant, then moves on, not looking back.

In broad daylight, when I'm not half drunk on hot beer, the steam-and-cream is a real sleazy dump, although garishly gaudy and colorful when contrasted to the refugee shelters surrounding it. The steam-and-cream is an ugly palace of plywood scavenged from military packing cases. The plywood has been covered with a multicolored layer of rusting beer cans which have been pounded flat and then tacked on, overlapping, like scales on a fish.

On the outside of the steam-and-cream is a large fading sign that says in block letters: CAR

WASHED & GET SCREWED. Inside the steam-and-cream are hot rocks and water in gourd dippers and twelve-year-old girls who suck you off.

It was inside this building that I saw Mr. Greenjeans catch Beaver Cleaver red-handed with Viet Cong agents, swapping a truckload of hand grenades for a knapsack full of raw heroin.

This steam-and-cream is the most famous and most popular boom-boom parlor in Eye-Corps because it features only round-eyed whores, none over the age of fifteen.

As we walk past, one girl striking poses in front of the steam-and-cream calls out to me,

"Hey, Captain, I think I love you. You got girlfriend Viet Nam?" She's a sexy black girl with a Vietnamese accent, wearing pink hot pants and high heels. Her yellow tank top is thin enough to leave nothing to the imagination. Her lips are too red with too much lipstick. "Ten dolla you. Number one fuckee.

"My name Peggy Sue. I love you too much. Sucky-sucky number one." Her voice is so snotty with contempt that you feel like slapping her face. "You pay now. No freebies today."

Some Navy Seabees surround Peggy Sue. The leader of the Seabees is a Chief Petty Officer with SUPERGRUNT written across the back of his flak jacket. Supergrunt yanks out a fat stack of MPCs--military payment certificates. The small paper bills are the colors and size of Monopoly money.

"Pussy," says Supergrunt. "I love it." And the Seabees laugh.

Peggy Sue, the black teenybopper whore, falls out of love with me with a heartbreaking lack of finesse. "Short-time?" she says to Supergrunt. "You pay now. I love you too much."

Peggy Sue latches onto Supergrunt's arm and drags him inside.

The other Seabees pair off with other girls. One of the Seabees says, "Hey, baby-san, you souvenir me one boom-boom?"

Baby-san giggles. "You cheap Charlie."

Somebody says, "You know, not counting gook whores, I'm a virgin!"

From inside the steam-and-cream steps the Funny Gunny, Beaver Cleaver's business partner.

He is fat and wears hornrimmed glasses with thick lenses. The thick lenses make his eyes look too big.

The Funny Gunny is eating fried chicken and laughing. He looks happier than a pig in shit.

He gnaws on a chicken leg and grins and nods to each and every incoming customer.

The Funny Gunny puts his arm around a white girl who looks like some pom-pom girl's younger sister. The girl has a sweet baby face but hard, mascaraed eyes. She is reading a comic book about the financial adventures of Donald Duck's Uncle Scrooge. "Hey, baby,"

she says to me, not looking up from her comic book, "me Tracy. Me cherry girl. Me horny.

Me so horny. I love you, G. I. No shit."

Saluting me with a chicken leg, the Funny Gunny says, "Go ahead, sir." He says with a southern accent, "Pork her eyes out. She's clean. A real round-eye! They're spook kids.

Little CIA bastards. We bring 'em in from all over Viet Nam. They have to be twelve years old. Younger'n that, can't use 'em; no tits. Now, Tracy's thirteen and just startin' to get a nice little pair of tits on her. And her pussy is as bald as a clam and tight as a vise."

The Funny Gunny grins at me again, then shrugs as if to say that he's just a good ol' country-assed boy trying to make a hard dollar in a highly competitive business.

The thirteen-year-old whore does not look at my face. She grabs my arm and tries to pull me inside. From the doorway I can see that the walls are still papered with Playboy centerfolds.

From inside the steam-and-cream come sex sounds and laughter and smells of stale cigarette smoke, cheap perfume, and sweat.

As I pull my arm free and walk away from the girl she says in a sneering, hateful tone, "You cheap Charlie," then jerks aside her black halter top and flashes a bee-sting tit. It's a reflex action, because she has already erased our entire romantic relationship from her mind.

Tracy's goodbye flash brings a hoot and a holler from a squad of giggling pogues as they shove past me, hot on her trail.

I rejoin the Woodcutter and Commander Be Dan, who have been watching me with interest.

As we walk away we can hear Supergrunt, the Seabee, giving an introductory lecture on the lore of whorehouses in Viet Nam: "These gook women are so small you have to screw them two at a time to get any satisfaction. And, yes, the rumors you have heard are true, gook pussies do, in fact, slant sideways. Half of these gook whores are serving officers in the Viet Cong. The other half have got TB. Just be sure you only fuck the ones that cough."

We walk into the village and everyone is excessively polite to me, the American officer.

Everyone smiles. But it's a fuck-you-I-hope-you-die smile. If these people are whipped dogs, it's only on the outside. They're all Chien Si,

every man, woman, and child. It's there in their faces, as plain as day. It's funny I never saw it before.

Our guide reappears. We follow her. She pauses at a hooch, then hurries away with her stage-prop laundry on her head, not looking back.

The Woodcutter, my bound prisoner, orders us into the hooch. Inside, I untwist the black comm wire from around the Woodcutter's wrists while silent women come in and serve us tea and rice cakes.

I am introduced to the confused women as Bao Chi, the American Front fighter.

Commander Be Dan changes out of his Arvin Ranger outfit and back into his black pajamas and hurries off on some urgent errand.

The Woodcutter and I squat on the dirt floor, silently sipping our tea.

Shadows come with the night. The shadows move in and out of the small hooch. There are so many of them; they must be waiting for their turns outside. They come to talk to the Woodcutter. Their voices are like the soft rippling of creek water. The Woodcutter speaks to each applicant softly, politely, with endless patience, sometimes rubbing his wrists, sometimes pausing to eat a rice cake.

A slender teenaged girl brings us red rice and fish.

We eat. The girl squats in front of me and stares. As the famous Chien Si My, I am becoming just another jaded celebrity. Everywhere I go, I have my fans. But there's something very unusual about this girl. She has a powerful presence.

It's dark in the hooch, so I can only scan the girl with my night vision. She is very beautiful.

Her hair is cut as short as a man's. She is wearing a black T-shirt, faded blue jeans, and red rubber sandals. In a shoulder holster the girl is packing a nickel-plated snub-nosed .38-caliber pistol. Around her neck hangs a braided string necklace with a white jade Buddha and a gold chain strung with maybe fifty dogtags.

The girl stares at me, silent, a Mona Lisa smile on her lips. She holds her head first this way, then that way, checking me out from every angle. She must be some kind of groupie. Boy, I hope so!

An electric chill grips my stomach as I sense that the girl is blind. She can't see me, but she knows a white foreigner when she smells one, like the

blind barge man. This beautiful woman is sitting here, calm and serene, thinking up extrapainful ways in which to torture me to death.

The shadows move. Someone lights a kerosene lantern.

The new light scares a gecko. The brown lizard doubletimes upside down along the thatched roof.

The Woodcutter says, "Bao Chi, I wish to introduce you to Miss Tiger Eye, the Commander of the Western Region. We are here in obedience to her orders."

Tiger Eye says, "I have heard of you, Bao Chi. You are becoming a legend to my people."

Then Tiger Eye says to me in English: "Welcome to my country."

I say, "Thank you, Comrade General."

Tiger Eye leans forward. In the lantern light I can see her face. She is not a teenager. She's probably in her early thirties; with Asians it's always hard to say for sure.

The Comrade General pulls a black eyepatch over her face and onto her right eye. She says,

"You. You. Boom-boom picture you? You buy. You. You buy."

Her performance makes her laugh merrily. She is the dream girl who sells dirty books out of her bra. She says, "I am a very good actress, Bao Chi. Oui? Don't you think so?" And she laughs again.

I laugh too.

I pull my dogtags up over my head and offer them to Tiger Eye in the polite way, with both hands.

Tiger Eye pulls off her eyepatch and leans forward again into the light so that I can slip the beaded chain over her head. I see something that makes me hesitate.

Tiger Eye is not blind, but she has lost her right eye. The eye socket now holds a marble as big as one of the Woodcutter's Ping-Pong balls. When I was a kid we called these oversized marbles "jug rollers." And we called this type of marble, crystal clear except for a single slash of yellow in the center, a "cat's eye."

Tiger Eye accepts my dogtags bashfully, smiling and blushing until I think she's going to cry.

She lifts a braided black string necklace from around her neck. On the string hangs a small white jade figure of the Buddha. She places the loop of

string over my head.

Then the Commander of the Western Region takes my right hand between her two hands and lifts the three hands between us. We sit like that, saying nothing, facing each other across the kerosene lamp and a blackened brass teapot.

The Woodcutter smokes his pipe. He looks at us without expression and nods his approval.

Midnight. Now all of the horny soldiers and Marines have retreated behind their barbed wire and are hunkered down in their firebases and landing zones, safe behind sandbagged walls and Claymore mines and interlocking fields of fire.

In the black-market section of the village people materialize out of the darkness, an army of ghosts in white paper hats.

Tiger Eye raises her hand and the people fall silent. The people stare at me and at my uniform with curiosity, fear and hatred until Tiger Eye explains who I am, Bao Chi, Chien Si My, a friend.

Commander Be Dan and a squad of Chien Si push through the crowd, shoving along a middle-aged Marine Gunnery Sergeant. The Funny Gunny is naked, gagged, his arms bound behind him over a bamboo pole. He is breathing hard, sweating like a pig, whimpering.

Nguyen Hai and Commander Be Dan take hold of the ends of the bamboo pole behind the Funny Gunny's arms and lift him up. They lower him into a hole about three feet deep.

Tiger Eye steps up to the hole and looks down at the Funny Gunny. She greets him:

"Monsieur le Sargent." Then she says in English: "You owe a blood debt to the people."

In Vietnamese Tiger Eye addresses the assembled villagers: "Someday the war will end. The Americans will leave us in peace. The American armymen will sail away from Viet Nam to descend like the plague upon some other small country, some weaker country, some country where the people are not strong fighters but can be bought and sold like farm animals. The Americans may go to the moon, but they will never get past the determination of the Vietnamese people. Our spirit is strong and the resistance makes us brothers and sisters.

American bombs can kill us as men and as women, but no invader can ever destroy us as a people as long as we diligently protect our children."

The villagers crowd together in a semicircle, some holding up torches of rice straw dipped in pitch.

The Phuong twins bring forward a fat Vietnamese man in a white shirt, white trousers, and white shoes. Bound and blind-folded, the man is kicked to his knees by the Phuong twins.

The man is begging and crying. When crying doesn't work, he spits and curses. Somewhere in the crowd a woman is screaming and is struggling against villagers who are holding her back. It's impossible to tell if the woman is screaming in anger at the man in white or in his defense.

The Woodcutter steps forward. He raises his arms up over his head, then down. In the torchlight the curved hot silver of a scimitar flashes, lopping off the fat man's head. The head rolls into a shadow. The body slumps forward, legs spasming and kicking. Blood pumps from the severed neck with great force and in great quantities. The black pool of blood soaks into the sand.

The Phuong twins grab the bamboo pole behind the Funny Gunny's arms and lift him up out of the hole. They shove him roughly toward the edge of the clearing and tie him to a palm tree. They pull out the bamboo pole and cut his hands free.

A fireteam of twelve-year-old girls with hammers reports to the tree. Two of the girls carry wooden water buckets. They drop the water buckets upside down and step up onto them.

While the Funny Gunny struggles, screaming into the gag, his eyes big, the four girls nail his hands and his feet to the tree.

Another girl walks forward. The girl is tall and white. She walks very slowly, slender and graceful and beautiful. On her perfect face there are no Asian features. She's a certified blue-eyed strawberry blonde with bedroom eyes, flared nostrils, and a pouting lower lip. Her name is Teen Angel. She is the star attraction at the Funny Gunny's steam-and-cream.

Teen Angel is wearing rhinestoned blue jeans, Adidas jogging shoes, and a yellow tank top full of heavy round breasts. The tank top proclaims RICH BITCH in glitter dust which sparkles in the flickering light of the torches. Around her neck hangs a long string of pink plastic pearls.

The Funny Gunny looks at Teen Angel. He is bleary-eyed, crying, and confused. He looks at Teen Angel as though glimpsing a goddess in a dream. Then he looks past Teen Angel and sees me, searches my eyes, scans my face and my Army Captain's uniform.

Teen Angel reaches out and touches the Funny Gunny's cheek, pulls down his gag, leans in so close that he can smell the cheap perfume on her breasts, so close that her hot breath fogs up his thick glasses. She kisses him on the mouth with her perfect lips, pressing her perfect body hard against him.

The surprise on the Funny Gunny's face turns to horror. He struggles, screams, whines, moans, coughs, groans, then screams again.

But it's too late.

Teen Angel turns and displays to her audience of villagers a bloody knife in a bloody hand. In her other hand is her trophy, a bloody mass of pink flesh.

She shows it to the Funny Gunny. The Funny Gunny's eyes are trying to explode out of their sockets as she shows it to him. He tries to scream, he tries really hard to scream, but he can't make a sound.

The girls standing on the water buckets go to work. One pinches the Funny Gunny's nose while the other chokes him. Eventually he is forced to open his mouth. Teen Angel stuffs the Funny Gunny's bloody cock and balls into his mouth. The girls on the wooden buckets get a grip on his head and continue to choke him while Teen Angel sews his lips together with heavy black thread.

When the sewing is done, Teen Angel pulls from her blue jeans pocket what appears to be a highly polished rifle-shell casing. She twists out a bright red lipstick. "Phuong Huoang," she says as she paints a thick layer of red onto the Funny Gunny's crudely sewn lips. "Phoenix Program."

"You Phoenix," she says, aiming the lipstick at the Funny Gunny. It is strange to hear someone with an American face speaking English with such a thick Vietnamese accent. "You Phoenix," she says again, bitterly. Then, looking into his eyes, her face close enough to be kissed, she says, "You Phoenix . . . I Phoenix you!"

There is a deep silence, like after a battle.

The villagers melt away into the darkness.

Somebody throws a torch into the steam-and-cream and the plywood whorehouse erupts into a palace of fire.

The Funny Gunny's sweaty face looks at me with the same expression I once saw on the face of a dying girl sniper during the battle for Hue City. The Funny Gunny is suffering. His eyes plead for mercy.

I pull the heavy pistol from my shoulder holster and I aim it at the Funny Gunny. He could hang on the palm tree for days, screaming, while the birds and the ants work on his eyes and maggots crawl in and out of his groin wound.

In the red glow of the burning whorehouse his eyes beg me to shoot him. I aim the pistol at his face. The Funny Gunny has no way of knowing that the pistol is empty. I dry fire it at him and he jumps. As I turn away, he looks confused.

Be advised, mercy is not what I do best.

The Woodcutter puts his hand on my shoulder, a signal that Commander Be Dan, the Nguyen brothers, and the Phuong twins are moving out. So we walk away from a place where one dying Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant hangs nailed to a tree and mutilated, his lips painted as red as a whore's.

We walk away fast, as silent as ghosts. Without hesitation we walk hard up against a solid black wall of jungle and the black wall of jungle opens up for us and takes us in.

Back in Hoa Binh, a week after the mutilation death of the Funny Gunny, I hear Song and Commander Be Dan making love. I'm down in the secret tunnel under our hooch. I've been studying an old clay model of Khe Sanh Combat Base. Black flags mark American positions.

The model pinpoints every treeline, every bunker, the ammo dump, the command post, and the precise locations of wire, Claymores, land mines, guns, howitzers, quad 50s, and M-60s.

I lived at Khe Sanh for a year and never knew this much detailed information about the base.

The Woodcutter and Johnny Be Cool have taken an ox cart loaded with firewood to sell at the market in a neighboring village. It's getting dark. They should he back by now.

I hear the sounds of someone in pain. I peek out through a crack in the trapdoor, cautiously.

When you live in Viet Nam you never know who might be paying you a surprise visit.

In the yellow light of a kerosene lantern I can see the joy on Song's face as she looks up at Commander Be Dan.

"Em," he says softly. "My darling."

Song stands up, embraces him, kisses him. "An Tho," she says. "My lover." And, "Ma cherie."

They undress each other, slowly, gently.

Song's body is very beautiful. From my peeping Tom's perch in the tunnel my eyes are more than half open. She has a chrysanthemum in her hair. Her breasts are small, but perfect, the nipples erect and almost black. The only flaws on her body are scars on her legs from working in the paddies and barbed wire cuts and the three toes missing from her left foot from when she was tortured by the National Police.

Commander Be Dan's body is ugly, pocked with bullet and shrapnel wounds and laced with scars from barbed-wire cuts.

Song sinks down to her knees and takes Commander Be Dan into her mouth.

After a few moments they lie down on a reed sleeping mat and make love. Between muted groans and long moans of pleasure they talk to each other in whispers. The tempo increases and their lovemaking becomes urgent and almost violent, like a rape, and then they are fucking, rutting joyfully like strong healthy animals, every muscle straining, sweaty, and beautiful.

They rest, kissing and caressing.

Then Commander Be Dan sits up. A turn of his head puts light where it reveals his missing ear, the ear he lost in the fight with the Huey gunship on the march back from the victorious battle at the Nung combat fortress. Naked in the soft yellow light of the lantern, Commander Be Dan breaks down his AK-47 assault rifle. With grunt skill and a precision born only from practice, he manipulates a toothbrush, oily rags, and a bore brush attached to a thin metal rod, using the smooth pink stump of his severed wrist just like it's a giant finger. Commander Be Dan cleans the AK-47 assault rifle that is his constant companion and the centerpiece of his life.

I remember Leonard Pratt, who fell in love with his rifle on Parris Island.

Song sits up behind the Commander, reaches around playfully to fondle his thick penis, rubs her breasts into his back. He slaps her hand away and grunts. Song pouts, punches him in the back with her small fist. Finally, giving up, she reaches around for his web gear and an oily rag.

While Commander Be Dan runs a cleaning rod through the bore of his rifle, Song unloads the curved banana clips inside the canvas pouches hung on an army surplus Russian belt. On the dull silver buckle of the belt is a red star.

In the gold light Song is a Polynesian princess; her long black hair is blacker than the black night outside the hooch. The bullets in her small hands gleam and glint like pieces of antique gold being offered to a god. With the oily rag Song wipes each bullet clean, carefully, almost lovingly, then snaps

it back into a banana clip.

I know it's wrong, but it feels necessary to watch Song and Commander Be Dan in their intimacy. I'm learning clean information vital for me to know. It's hypnotizing to stare point-blank at the depth and breadth of your own stupidity.

I watch them, so close I can smell their sweat, afraid that my breathing might give me away.

Commander Be Dan snaps his weapon together, by the numbers, fast, not missing a beat.

He's an enemy of my government, but I think he's good people, a real pro, a raggedy-assed rice-propelled Asian grunt. Sometimes the respect between men who fight against death from opposite sides of the wire can become bigger than flags. To kill a man as dedicated as Commander Be Dan would require another man of equal dedication. And dedicated men are so rare that Commander Be Dan is practically assured of immortality.

Commander Be Dan nods approval as he dry-fires his rifle.

He puts out his good hand. Song leans forward, kisses his hand, then souvenirs him one fully loaded banana clip heavy with thirty golden bullets with which to fight the Black Rifles.

The Commander accepts the banana clip without comment and snaps it into place, then jacks a round into the chamber. He leans the loaded rifle within easy reach against the wall of the hooch.

I close the trapdoor and sit in the darkness.

I can hear them together. They make love again, this time almost in silence. Song's orgasm is like a groan of pain, and for several minutes afterward she sobs, while the Commander whispers, his voice almost trembling, "Em . . . Em . . ."

I sit in the tunnel for an hour, until Song and the Commander are sleeping peacefully.

When I peek out of the trapdoor the moonlight coming in through unshuttered and glassless windows is bright enough for me to see that in their sleep they are holding hands.

I crawl down the black tunnel for twenty yards, feeling my way in total darkness.

I walk down along the riverbank. The river flows black and gold in the moonlight. I listen to the crickets having a creaking contest. As I walk, frogs plop into the water. The night air is moist and clean, sweet with the perfume of the night lotus.

I sit in the sand in the dark, near the washing rock, dreaming about the Alabama in my mind, dreaming of escape. If only I didn't have this bad leg . . .

I think, as I fall asleep, that I should steal a weapon and some food and double-time into the jungle like a big-assed bird, with Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim, my old Drill Instructor, as my only companion on the long road home. Gunny Gerheim would walk beside me, reminding me: "All you got to do, prive, is take one step. Just one step. Just one step at a time.

Anybody can take one step, Private joker. Even you."

I've got arrowheads in my dreams again tonight. When I was a boy I hiked the rolling red-clay hills of Alabama, picking up arrowheads made of flint, obsidian lances, gray stone axes.

Sometimes I'd find baked clay beads and broken pieces of pottery.

The crowing of a rooster wakes me. It is not dawn. The Woodcutter's little red and gold rooster has been fooled again by a false impersonation of dawn. Illumination rounds popped on the horizon, and the rooster decided that it was his cue to cut loose. It's strange, but Communist roosters don't crow any different from the American kind. For a long second I thought I was back in the World, back in Hometown, U.S.A.

The moon is red. The moon is burning up in flames behind a black cloud. Silhouettes of coconut palms are sharply defined against the red sky

as masses of swaying black blades.

The frogs crank up their volume another notch. A dog runs along the riverbank, barking at the movement of the river. The dog is black and white, half ghost, half shadow.

I think about my father, always working, always making a crop, but never making a dollar ahead of next month's feed bill, happy just to be alive and healthy and with honest work to do.

I think about my mother. Whenever I think of my mother she's always wearing one of those flour-sack dresses she wore when I was a boy, and she's always cooking supper or putting up preserves.

I think about how much I miss my baby sister, Stringbean, whose idea of joy in life is to put salted peanuts into her RC Cola and watch it fizz.

I think about Old Ma, my grandmother, who is always full of energy and good humor. Right now she's probably out fishing in the Black Warrior River, her faded khaki trousers rolled up over her bony brown knees, wading back and forth with a bamboo fishing pole, red worms wiggling in her shirt pockets. I can see her hooking a yellow catfish, fighting it, then pulling it from the water. I can see the fat catfish flopping on the end of her line, white-bellied, glistening wet in the sun.

Small-arms fire crackles, far away, and is answered by thumping shells and slow-motion blips of neon. Enemy artillery is going in. Metal projectiles tear open the sky and collide with the stars and bounce off the moon. A hundred-pound artillery shell floats and sighs and slams into some rocky ridge where dumb grunts hunker down, cold and wet, in some grubby little bunker in some unimportant sector of some half-forgotten firebase.

The grunts eat cold C's with bandaged hands while humming rock-and-roll songs. To the artillery shells exploding all around them, they say, "Shot at and missed, shit on and hit."

And when Puff the Magic Dragon comes, bringing forty thousand rounds of happiness, and rains red death onto their enemies, the grunts nod to one another knowingly, satisfied, and they say, "Spooky understands."

Sometimes I have nightmares. I see Daddy D.A. and Thunder and Donlon and Animal Mother, and all of the others, all of the strong young faces. I see all of my friends, dead, lying facedown in the mud on some dismal LZ.

Red bullets dance on the horizon, and I can hear the dark music of violent death, all beat, no rhythm.

I strain my mind until my head hurts. I try to catalog the objects in my room in Alabama. I try to recite the titles and authors of all of my books.

Walking in the Alabama in my mind, I see forests and streams. I see freshly plowed cotton fields full of Yankee cannonballs and Cherokee bones, and I think about every arrowhead I ever found, the shape, the color, and what the day was like when I found it.

I remember hunting arrowheads in our neigbbor's freshly plowed cornfield after a rain. I found a perfect Indian arrowhead of blue flint lying inches away from a Confederate musket ball.

On our own farm I found only enemy bullets. We plowed up so much Federal ordnance in our fields that Old Ma used Yankee Minie balls for sinkers when she went fishing for catfish.

I sit, staring out over the black water of the river and as I listen to the flowing of the water the night goes on and on without end and I think about catfish and about how catfish have whiskers and look like Fu Manchu.

Noon at the Luu Dan factory. After a sleepless night on the riverbank I still feel stiff, I've got a cough, and my nose is running.

The day is quiet and peaceful. The air is clean and the sun is a gold coin. I smell a fire and rice cooking. I can hear children playing nearby, running in a ragged troop along the paddy dike, laughing, flying a long blue kite shaped like a dragon.

Battle Mouth is playing with the village children. For months after the victorious battle at the Nung combat fortress Battle Mouth was a catatonic zombie. When he finally did snap out of it, his personality had improved and he was no longer an asshole. He no longer wants to slaughter the jackals of imperialism for the glory of socialism. All he wants to do now is be a little kid again. And the little kids of Hoa Binh don't mind. The kids love Battle Mouth because he likes to laugh and have fun and is big enough to give them piggyback rides.

Most of the villagers are out working in the paddies. The harvest is almost over.

Under an open-air canopy of glossy green palm fronds and bamboo poles we sit, cross-legged on reed mats, our faces tiger-striped by wedges of

sunlight. We sing as we work, constructing military equipment out of American trash, making Luu Dan weapons for the People's Army.

We sit in a row. In front of each worker is a pile of components. As each Luu Dan is passed from hand to hand along the human assembly line each person attaches a component from his pile.

The boy to my right has a harelip and likes to smile. He has the same cheerful, spaced-out expression on his face all the time, every day, like he's either retarded or eats opium with a spoon. In front of the boy is a pile of red metal Coca-Cola cans gathered from American trash dumps by the children of the village.

With a cold chisel the boy rakes a can from the pile. He flips the can upright with the chisel, an impressive trick. He presses the chisel hard onto the center of the bottom of the can and gives the chisel a precise tap with a square-headed hammer, punching a hole into the can.

Using the cold chisel like a big finger, he flips the punctured Coke can into my pile, claws another can from his pile, upends it with a practice motion, and his hammer falls again.

The rhythm of the work is steady. As we work we sing:

On we go to liberate the South
Smash the jails, sweep out the aggressors
For independence and freedom
Taking back our food and shelter
Taking back the glory of spring. . . .

I pick up a punctured Coke can. I insert a bamboo handle that is about four inches long into the hole in the bottom of the can. I toss the can to an impatient Johnny Be Cool, who is always one beat ahead of me in the rhythm of the production line.

Johnny Be Cool's nimble fingers insert a coiled string into the hollow bamboo handle. The string is attached to a pull ring of braided comm wire. Before he hands the Luu Dan to the Broom-Maker, Johnny Be Cool slips a cap of hammered tin over the bottom of the bamboo handle.

The Broom-Maker inserts a pair of wire cutters into the small drinking hole on the top of the can and cuts across the top, folding back two flaps of thin metal.

Song takes the can from the Broom-Maker and inserts a short metal cylinder hacksawed from a length of plumbing pipe. Inside the short piece

of pipe is a simple spark-producing friction firing mechanism. Song carefully ties the end of the string inside the bamboo handle to the firing mechanism.

Behind Song is a scrawnv little old man with no teeth. He is sitting on a defused American howitzer shell with a hacksaw in his hand. He holds on to the shell with his legs while he hacksaws through it like a metal log. After a minute or so he stops sawing and pours water from a plastic Pepsi bottle onto the shell. When he starts sawing avain the wet shell slips free and the little old man grunts, wrestling with the shell until he loses his grip and falls to the ground like a rodeo rider.

The assembly line laughs.

Song says, "The bomb is alive!" and everybody laughs again.

The bony little shell rider stalks his prey. He hops back into the saddle. In the high-pitched rasp and grind of his hacksaw metal dust flies. The tip of the shell falls off and the old man has laid a big copper-jacketed egg. Only the egg has hatched and there are no bronze baby birds inside. Instead, the shell is full of old cheese, light tan on the outside, off-white on the inside. The old man with no teeth quickly plunders the inside of the shell, digging out the TNT with a fish knife.

Song cautiously stuffs the piece of plumbing pipe with the white waxy scrapings, then passes the can to a chubby twelve-year-old girl in a red T-shirt. From a mound of materials scrounged by the smaller children of the village, the girl fills the Coke can with bits of glass, nails, scrap metal, truck engine parts, rusty shrapnel, paperclips, thumbtacks, and other sharp and deadly things.

At the end of the assembly line a black cast-iron cooking pot full of hot pitch boils over a wood fire. It smells like a hot road. Bubbles pop on the surface as it is stirred. With a gourd dipper full of hot pitch, an old woman in a patched UCLA Bruins sweatshirt seals the top of the Coke can, then holds the can upside down and seals any open spaces in the hole around the bamboo handle. She looks like a chamber of commerce volunteer dipping candy apples at the country fair. She lays the finished homemade hand grenade on its side to cool.

Just before lunch the hand grenades are picked up by children who carry them in small rattan baskets on a bed of straw, like Easter eggs. The

children hurry to distribute the Luu Dan weapons to Chien Si fighters in camouflaged defensive positions around the village.

At noon, when the sun is without mercy, our lunch arrives on the back of a snorting black water buffalo led by an eight-year-old girl. The girl guides the bulky monster, tugs him along, her fingers hooked over the heavy brass ring in the water bo's nose. When the water bo hesitates or deviates, the midget buffalo handler gives the animal a sharp slap across the nose with the palm of her hand.

As we distribute lunch bundles from two giant earthenware jugs slung on either side of the water buffalo, Battle Mouth comes up and greets me and smiles at me. He likes me now, maybe because I'm the only other adult in the village who has time to play games with him and the kids.

We pass out small wooden bowls and wait our turns as hot rice is ladled out with a tin cup.

A shell hits the deck a mile from the village. We ignore it. Just another short round. Just some gungy cannon cockers playing that silly game they play.

Dark gray puffs of smoke appear in a treeline two hundred yards to the east, followed by muffled explosions. H&I fire--harassment and interdiction. The Americans and their puppet armymen shoot shells at random into areas where troop movements have been reported by recon. Another Long Nose crazy thing, of no consequence to anyone except as a source of dud shells with which to construct Luu Dan weapons and as an annoyance for Comrade Lizard.

Shells fall. Then more shells.

The Woodcutter appears in a nearby vegetable field. He squints, shields his eyes from the sun with a callused hand. He gives an order and immediately the men and women in the field drop their farm implements and lift bundles of black plastic sheeting from beneath the paddy water. Inside the bundles of black plastic sheeting are weapons.

In the village, somebody is banging a shell casing with a bayonet.

At the grenade factory the women collect our uneaten bowls of rice and dump the rice back into the earthenware jugs.

Commander Be Dan and Bo Doi Bac Si dee-dee down the paddy dike. The Woodcutter and Commander Be Dan have a muted but animated conference that, this time, does not end in an angry confrontation.

As we watch the gray puffs of smoke whump-crumping into the treeline we think about how sometimes the Arvin puppet soldiers like to crank off a few rounds of artillery for no particular reason except that they get nervous and the noise boosts their morale.

But these shells are obviously not intended to hit anything, not even ghost battalions of Viet Cong, and are not marking rounds. All of the shells are striking the same spot, in a tight group, not in a pattern. A pattern kills, a tight group minimizes the danger of hitting innocent bystanders.

General Fang Cat may be a corrupt public official, but he is an honest businessman. General Fang Cat is firing his rusty old guns to fulfill his contract with the Woodcutter. The incoming shells are a warning.

Commander Be Dan, the Woodcutter, and Bo Doi Bac Si are all running down paddy dikes in different directions, and Song has disappeared.

"Truc Thang!" yells the old man without teeth who hacksaws artillery shells. "Truc Thang!

Truc Thang!"

And he's right. The sky is full of helicopters. The killer locusts are coming, armed to the teeth, gunships and troop carriers, buzzing high in the sky, holding off, waiting for the artillery barrage to lift. No doubt company commanders are screaming obscenities into radio handsets, asking what stupid son of a bitch opened fire ten minutes early and what stupid son of a bitch is continuing to fire ten minutes late.

Everyone is running somewhere. The village gong bongs with heavy resonance, announcing the attack.

I don't move. Johnny Be Cool waves goodbye, then charges off to take care of his water buffalo. My leg is still stiff from the wound I got on the combat mission. I can hump, but I'm awkward, slow, and clumsy when I run. There's no cover crossing the paddies. I don't want to be caught out in the open by the gunships.

When General Fang Cat has decided that he has jumped the gun on his orders as much as he can safely explain away as merely the fortunes of war, the artillery lifts, and the sky is open for the gunships.

Under the canopy of the Luu Dan factory I watch as American airplanes fill the sky. There is the knifing of green wings and four Phantom fighter-bombers roll in for a bomb run across the village.

Five-hundred-pound bombs drift down at an angle, black blobs with Xs on top. Energy bells blossom and hang in the air for an instant, faintly visible, like heat coming up off a hot road.

Hooches, trees, and disassembled people float up into the sky. Then, as though unrelated, a muffled thud, followed closely by a tremor in the ground.

I pull up a reed sleeping mat in one corner of the Luu Dan factory and lift the trapdoor of a tunnel. I climb down into the tunnel and the trapdoor drops back into place.

I learned the locations of every tunnel in the village by playing an educational game with Johnny Be Cool, Battle Mouth, and the kids. We walk through the village and I say "Boom"

and the last kid into a tunnel loses the game.

The first thing I learned about life in a Viet Cong tunnel was that Viet Cong tunnels were not constructed for tall people. I crawl a few yards, then squat and push my back hard against the earth wall. I can't see my hand in front of my face. I can't breathe. Mud has sucked my rubber sandals off and now is closing in cold and wet over my toes. A spiderweb catches me in the face. I spit. Furry lumps splash in water. I hear rats clawing for high ground.

The wall against my back reverberates. Moist soil falls down all over me. I spit again. I cough. There is dirt in my eyes. I press my ear against the cold tunnel wall and I can hear the battle, big thumps, rhythmic strings of impacting raindrops, and, as clear as any field radio, the rumble of tanks.

And I think: They are going to blow the tunnel, they are going to blow the tunnel, I just know that they are going to blow it. Some dumb grunt is standing up there popping a Willy Peter grenade. The Willy Peter grenade is a light green canister with a yellow stripe. I hear it.

There, that's the spoon flying off. The grunt is going to drop the Willy Peter grenade into the tunnel and fry me like Spam. Then the tunnel rats will come down and be scared and amazed when they find me.

I panic. I hear more rats. I think I hear boots topside. I feel something slimy trying to crawl up my leg. My test drive of a grave has inspired me with a sudden will to live. I push, pull, heave, climb, and claw my way up out of the tunnel.

Back out in the light, I rest on my stomach, pumping air, cold and wet, plastered with mud, dead leaves, and sweat.

Somewhere a water buffalo bellows horrible death agonies.

When I stand up, I see a world of shit coming down.

In the rice paddy water the reflection of a prehistoric flying monster grows larger and larger at a fantastic rate until it turns into a Cobra gunship and roars in at one hundred miles per hour, shaking the canopy over the Luu Dan factory with a hot blast of wind and sand. Miniguns are chopping away chug-chug-chug and the Cobra fires hissing rockets with long tails of smoke.

The rockets look like white snakes with heads of fire.

The Broom-Maker runs past the Luu Dan factory, her clothes charred and smoking. She runs steadily and with intense concentration, ignores me, ignores and is perhaps unaware of the fact that both of her hands have been blown off and blood is pumping out of the shredded flesh of her wrists.

The Cobras swing around and roar in for another gun-run. Bullets blast the hooches to pieces. There is red fire on the thatched roofs and black smoke beyond the fire.

I turn to face the tanks.

The tanks are bulky mud-splattered monsters, attacking on line through the rice fields, crushing through the paddy dikes with no effort at all, grinding the rice into heavy crunching treads and destroying the crop, plowing deep into the paddies like bloated iron hogs grunting in the mud.

Small-arms fire cranks up to full volume on the far side of the village, recon by fire, right on cue, and I know it's a ground attack. The popping of AKs begins to mingle with the whack-whack of M-16s.

Johnny Be Cool reappears, picks up an Easter basket full of red metal eggs from the end of the Luu Dan factory assembly line.

A tank with CONG AU-GO-GO painted in big Day-Glo letters on the turret growls up and stops twenty yards away. Painted on the tank hull is a squad of little yellow men in conical hats, neatly X'd out.

Behind the tank, enemy infantry is coming in on line and in force.

The grunts are wearing new jungle utilities, new canvas jungle boots, new web gear, new everything. They are legs, line doggies, Army pukes. It's as easy to tell Army grunts from field Marines as it is to tell a bag lady from a Paris model.

From behind a burning waterwheel a squad of Army grunts charges my position at high port.

The squad sets up a perimeter protecting the tank while the Tank Commander gives them covering fire with the .50-caliber machine gun on top of the tank.

"BAN! BAN!" yells Commander Be Dan, and suddenly I am no longer alone in my heroic one-man unarmed defense of the Luu Dan factory.

Commander Be Dan yells in English: "Airborne armymen, airborne armymen, fuck you."

As the Army grunts exchange fire with the village Self-Defense Militia I crawl out of the way of some bullets and take cover behind a dead water bo.

The firefight gets hotter. Johnny Be Cool takes a grenade from the Easter basket, pulls the tin cap from the end of the bamboo handle, hooks his thumb into the comm wire pull ring, and throws, as hard as he can.

The grenade arcs out, string unraveling until it is taut and jerks a sparking pin from the grenade. Friction ignites the firing mechanism. After a couple of more seconds in flight the grenade explodes.

Johnny Be Cool throws homemade hand grenades, one after the other, by the numbers.

About half of the grenades are duds.

The noise level gets scary and black powder smoke floats across the battlefield like ground fog. The stubby barrels of black M-16s spit sparks of gold fire as Johnny Be Cool throws hand grenades at the tank.

I peek over the warm carcass of the dead water bo. The tank looks undamaged.

I see a grunt. The grunt is trying to pull himself up by clawing at the steel treads of the tank, but he can't stand up. He looks down, then screams at the sight of his thigh bones jammed into the earth like white stakes.

Johnny Be Cool cocks his arm to throw his last grenade.

Bullets tattooing the air over my head and rocking the water bo carcass tell me it's time to change my position. As I stand up something hits me a glancing blow on the side of the head.

I fall backward. The sky above me is filled with the black tumble of grenades. I watch the lazy flight of the smooth green ovals. Somebody is sowing hard noisy seeds of kiss-your-ass-goodbye.

Concussion sucks all the blood out of my face while a stone elephant sits down onto my head and black noise embeds hundreds of fragments of steel wire into my living flesh.

People are yelling at one another all around me. I don't know what's going on.

Somebody screams, "GUNS UP!" Then: "MEDIC UP!" Then: "PONCHO UP!"

Two brown balloons are having an argument right above my face. The argument is about some guy who is maybe dead or maybe not dead. I think maybe it's me.

They roll me onto a poncho and lift me up. They carry me into the village while I bounce around like a rag doll and wonder if I'm alive.

By the time we reach the village common, which is being used as a landing zone for the medevac choppers, I'm feeling better. That is, I'm feeling alive enough to be in pain. My face is throbbing like it has been string by yellow jacket wasps and I've got blood coming out of my nose and ears.

The brown balloons drop me onto the deck next to a platoon of wounded grunts.

Ten yards away, a big Sergeant, a white giant with a steel-gray crew cut and a bomb-shaped head, drags Johnny Be Cool kicking and screaming out of a drainage ditch by his ankles, and drops him on the deck. Somebody gives Johnny Be Cool a vertical butt-stroke to the head with a shotgun. Thirty yards away I can hear the crack of Johnny Be Cool's neck.

The big Sergeant bends down and lifts Johnny Be Cool's body, with both hands, the way you might pick up a seabag, and carries it to the edge of the common and throws it down a well.

Surrounded by chaos, I stand up. Some bad poison washes through my body. I stumble like a drunk, looking for a weapon.

I find an enemy KIA and I take his weapon, an M-79 grenade launcher. I stumble on, looking for a target.

A Charlie-Charlie, a command chopper, blasts sand into a cloud that obscures the battle. Flat round winnowing baskets fly through the air like bronze coins. The chopper looms in the sky directly above me, hovering so close I can almost reach out and touch it, if I could lift my arms. Squinting into the tornado of prop wash I see stenciled across the belly of the chopper: a white skull and YOU HAVE JUST BEEN KILLED COURTESY OF THE 107TH

ARMORED CAVALRY--THE BUCKEYE BOYS--GHOST RIDERS IN THE SKY.

The Charlie-Charlie rolls away, a bird of prey looking for enemy gooks to kill, and I use all of my strength to lift the M-79 grenade launcher.

I fire. Bloop. It is the first time in over a hundred years that a member of my family has fired upon federal troops.

The blooper grenade blows off the chopper's tail rotor and the Charlie-Charlie drops, crashing down into a hooch.

As the Charlie-Charlie goes down, I faint.

The next thing I know, I'm crawling on my hands and knees, looking for another weapon.

The blooper holds only one round and I forgot to get any ammunition.

I see an Arvin officer wringing the neck of the Woodcutter's little red and gold rooster. The Arvin inserts the chicken's head under his belt. As the Arvin walks away the dead chicken bounces against his thigh.

Army snuffies who don't look old enough to ride a bicycle are on an important resource-denial mission. They stand on line and piss on patched gunnysacks full of rice they have dragged out of tunnels with meat hooks.

I see five Arvin puppet armymen hiding behind a booch. The Arvins are putting battle dressings onto themselves so that they can be medevaced out of the fighting.

Bo Doi Bac Si has been captured by Army grunts. A red-faced potbellied Top Sergeant is hitting Bo Doi Bac Si upside his head. Bo Doi Bac Si does not flinch, but glares back in defiance, holds his head high, and every time they ask him a question, he spits. They hit him in the mouth. He spits blood at them.

I call out to Bo Doi Bac Si, but my words get lost somewhere in the air inside my chest.

Arvin puppet troops wander casually through the horror circus like Huckleberry Finns playing hooky from school and looking for a place to fish.

They've hanged Song. With a strand of barbed wire they've hanged Song from the giant banana tree. Her neck is broken. Her tongue protrudes from her mouth, black and grotesque.

Three baby-faced kids in olive-drab green stand on the hood of the old French armored car and poke at Song's bruised thighs with the barrels of

their M-16s. If not for the war these guys would still be standing outside some small-town pool hall saying, "Aw, my ass," to each other just loud enough to be overheard by passing high school girls.

The baby-faced grunts laugh wildly as one of them takes out his shiny chrome Zippo lighter and sets fire to Song's pubic hair. Her body twitches, her fingers flutter. The kids laugh.

"She's got ghosts in her!"

I should feel sad, but I don't. I don't feel anything. All I can think about is that I wish my face didn't hurt so much, and I think that if I'm going to die, why can't I just fucking die and be done with it. Why do I have to do all of this bleeding and see this Mickey Mouse murder exhibition?

I try to take one more step, just one more step. But I don't. I collapse. I lie on my back on the ground and I wait for the great shadow to move across my face.

A cheerful medic in a skuzzy boonie hat kneels down and whips out a morphine Syrette. The medic slaps the crook of my arm to find a vein. He tries to give me an injection of morphine.

But his hand is shaking so hard he can't get the needle in. I reach over and hold his arm steady while he gives me the shot. I say, "Cancel the ambulance. I think it's only a hard-on."

The little medic laughs.

As I start turning into white rubber, the medic puts Band-Aids on my wounds. This strikes me as a little odd.

Somebody says, "L-T, Mortar Magnet is playing medic again." The voice shoves Mortar Magnet away from me and says, "Shit. Get away from that man, head case."

Another voice says, "Mortar Magnet, you are hereby transferred to the military police."

"Yes, L-T. "

"Arrest yourself. Get your crazy ass over to that little hooch and help rig that Chi-Com gear for demo."

"Yes, L-T. "

A big black medic with an easy grin pats me on the shoulder and says, "Be cool, m'man. You are safe and sound. It been some cold shit being held prisoner by these Charlie Congs, but you with righteous American dudes now. We here to help you. We been humping all over this A-O looking for

you. Birds are inbound. You be out of this ville on a dustoff quicker than a gook can shit rice."

A voice says, "Move it, people."

A skinhead Lieutenant leans down and looks at my face. He's a pudgy little guy, another wild-eyed butter-bar bucking for tracks. His hair is red and cut high and tight. The Lieutenant says, "Is that him?"

"Shit, L-T," says the black medic, "I guess it must be him!"

Scattered small-arms fire erupts somewhere far away. Commander Be Dan and the fighters must have hit a blocking force.

I cough. I spit up some vomit. I look at it to make sure it's nothing worse than vomit.

The Army Lieutenant's face comes down, a freckled white balloon blotting out the sun.

"Hang tough, trooper," he says. "Don't sweat the small shit. We'll get the gooks for you.

Payback is a motherfucker. Just don't you worry." He pats my arm. "You're what this is all about."

I must be giving the Army Lieutenant a funny look because he savs, "Bird Dog overflight spotted you in a rice paddy. One round-eye on the ground. The Word came down. Extract all friendly personnel. Then kill everybody and let God sort them out."

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not a fucking soldier."

The Lieutenant's face does not change expression. "What? What did you say?"

"I'm not a fucking Army puke. I'm a United States Marine. Retired." I clear my throat with a grunt. "Davis, James T., Private E-1, serial number 2306777." I take a deep breath and say in Vietnamese: "Do Me Hoa Chanh." Then in English: "I don't surrender. Fuck you."

A grunt walks by with a severed head tied by the hair to the barrel of his M-16. It's one of the Phuong twins.

The Lieutenant looks at me without changing his expression. He says to the black medic,

"Get him onto a dustoff, Doc. "

A radioman appears. The radioman is wearing a big floppy straw hat. He says, "L-T, you want gunships? And the Sergeant Major wants you ASAP. He says he's got a mutiny situation in Third Platoon."

Still looking at me, the Lieutenant says, "Negative gunships. Roger the Sergeant Major." He suddenly turns away and shouts: "Police up that gear, trooper. Corporal, where is that personnel damage assessment? Get me a body count of these Oriental human beings. And have some of your people check out those enemy structures, then blow them."

The Lieutenant walks away, saying to somebody, "That's affirmative. Put your ordnance over there."

Soldiers are pulling muddy weapons and military equipment out of tunnels. An angry grunt with a red face is furiously bayoneting a bamboo canteen, grunting with satisfaction after each vicious thrust.

I'm lifted up and carried through a cloud of grape smoke and into a storm of stinging sand thrown up the prop wash of inbound medevac choppers.

I'm put down with the wounded who are waiting to be onloaded. The medics are slashing gear from the wounded with knives. The medics cut off my black pajamas. They leave me naked, but I'm allowed to keep my beat-up old Stetson.

Being wounded makes us invisible. The soldiers burning the village with torches of bamboo and straw look right through us like we're already ghosts. You're no longer a part of what's going on. You feel out of place. You wonder what's going to happen to you. Where are you going, you ask, and will it hurt? You don't like sick people and you certainly don't want to be left behind with strangers.

Medevac choppers set down, and hacking blades like motorized machetes blast pinpoints of shrapnel. The choppers load the litter cases first: head wounds, VSIs--Very Seriously Injured--and Expectants. A chopper lifts off and the down-draft from the blurred rotor blades catches blood pouring from the open belly door and prop wash splatters the litter bearers on the ground with pink mist.

Some Army grunts stroll by like they're on their way to a picnic at the beach. The soldiers laugh too loud and talk too loud. Two of the soldiers have a grip on Bo Doi Bac Si's ankles.

They are dragging him away for the body count. Somebody has nailed a unit insignia patch to his forehead. A bonybrown puppy lopes along beside the body, nudging in to lick blood off of Bo Doi Bac Si's face.

A friendly medic kneels down and spreads Xylocaine ointment over my face and hands. The sun is in my eye, so I can't see him. I say, "Thanks, pal." After a few moments my face and hands get numb and go away for a little trip.

I turn my head to starboard. For ten yards, in perfectly aligned rank and file, in formation even in death, lumpy body bags full of soldiers wait with flawless patience.

I roll to port toward the sound of muted moans. Somebody has made a mistake. The only medevac priority lower than a dead American is a gutshot Vietnamese woman. Some New Guy medic who didn't know any better has brought the Fighter-Widow, the mother of B-Nam Hai, and has left her with the wounded on a bed of bloody battle dressings, thinking she'll be medevaced.

B-Nam Hai is not to be seen, but a bawling baby who is only just learning to walk waddles up to the Fighter-Widow, plops down next to her, and holds the dying woman's hand.

A skinny soldier with a freshly shaved bald head and with fat red and white battle dressings tied to both of his legs is shoving his right index finger in and out of an exit wound in the Fighter-Widow's stomach. The Fighter-Widow whimpers and whines, but not loud. There is the metallic odor of fresh blood.

Somebody laughs. A middle-aged man with eyebrows as black as raven's wings and a dimpled chin sits up. The man has combed his black hair across his head in an attempt to hide his bald spot. He looks like my high school football coach. But he doesn't look wounded, and he's got all of his gear with him.

The Coach says, "You retarded West Texas cracker son of a bitch. Murphy, I'm glad they got you, boy. I'm glad they did it to you. Your body count is a standing joke. I always said you couldn't walk point for shit." The Coach burps and feels his chest.

Murphy with the grayish-white bald head says, "Aw, leave me alone, Sarge. I'm finger-fucking a gook."

Someone laughs, but not the Coach. The Coach is falling back, spitting blood.

A passing medic dips down to the Coach for an instant and then walks on. The medic jerks a thumb over his shoulder and says to the litter bearers, "Tag him and bag him."

Somewhere someone screams, long and horrible, and you think: That could not possibly be a human being, and the litter bearers who are loading the wounded stand still and listen. And you can see that one of the litter bearers, a short potbellied guy loaded down with ammunition bandoliers stuffed full of battle dressings, is wetting his pants but doesn't know it yet. He listens to the scream and has a look on his face like a punji stake just pierced his foot.

A Mexican guy with a big Zapata mustache and a red M marked on his forehead with a laundry pencil to show that he's had morphine, rocks back and forth while his chubby round face with its square white teeth tells everybody in Mexican his newly devised deadly program of revenge because the gooks have wasted all of his friends. The medics have tied the Mexican up with rope. Between his Spanish threats he chants, rocking back and forth against the rope, "Payback is a motherfucker. Payback is a motherfucker."

As they load me onto the cavernous belly of a vibrating machine I see soldiers hammering steel rods into the ground to find tunnels for the tunnel rats. The tunnel rats are expert miners who dig for things that are where they do not belong.

The sun is going down but somewhere they've dropped a Willy Peter grenade into a tunnel and the village is lit up by white and yellow flashes of secondary explosions. The sympathetic detonations sound like a trainload of ammunition cooking off.

Army medics lift a wounded man into the chopper and lay him down next to me, talking to him all the time to reassure him, touching him gently so that he won't feel alone, but you see the look in their eyes and the look in their eyes has already pronounced him dead.

After the last of the medics have loaded the last of the body bags like very heavy laundry the medics hop off the cargo door and run into the hiss of the turbines, bent low to avoid the blurred rotor blades, turning their faces away from the sting of the prop wash.

I'm floating in a morphine haze, zoned out, and the scene that I'm a part of is moving slower and slower and at any moment will freeze and stop.

I lean back against the belly of the Chinook cargo helicopter, packed in tight among a full load of dead and wounded soldiers. It's like being inside the belly of a green aluminum whale. I cling to the red nylon webbing on the walls.

The wind howls in through the open cargo door. The wind must be freezing, but I feel warm.

As I sink into a warm sleep an Army medic sitting facing me talks into a field radio handset.

He reads out the names and serial numbers of casualties. Somewhere far away, in a nice quiet office, some candy-assed pogue is already turning the sticky red blood into clean white paperwork so that it can be filed and forgotten.

The medic's voice is a flat monotone: "Ah, I say again, ah, be advised that's fourteen, I say again one four-Kilo India Alpha, and thirty-nine, that's three-niner, ah, say again, over.

Negative on your last interrogatory. I say again, three-niner Whiskey India Alpha. And one round-eyed P.O.W., that's Papa, Oscar, Whiskey, with multiple lacerations . . ."

The singsong rhythm of the medic's voice is soothing as he continues, chewing gum as he talks, submitting his data, ending with: "Multiple gunshot wounds to the lower abdomen . . .

traumatic amputation of right leg below the knee. That's a rog on your last. Negative further.

Out."

On the other side of the darkness I walk into the Alabama in my mind. I walk across a plowed, sun-baked cornfield after a rain, looking for Indian weapons made out of flint.

Fwop, fwop, fwop, and we are leaving the earth behind and it's dark outside and on the other side of the darkness I'm dreaming and I'm not unhappy, because I know that what goes around comes around and what's coming down is already on the way. The Nguyen brothers and the surviving Phuong twin and Ba Can Bo and the Woodcutter and Battle Mouth and Commander Be Dan and the people of Hoa Binh will march out of the jungle to fight again, because this is their land and we're on it.

I float in warm sleep and memories, and I am happy to know that before dawn the Woodcutter and Commander Be Dan will be back in the village, posting sentries, caring for the wounded, and burying the dead. Now the dead can sleep, forever bonded to the living, in sacred soil made rich and fertile by the blood and the bones of their ancestors.

The Woodcutter and Commander Be Dan will take care of business. Then, together, they will go looking for Song.

The medevae chopper rumbles through the night air like a flying boxcar. The wind feels good, cool and clean. Above the pounding of the rotor blades we can hear small-arms fire, far below.

We pass other choppers and somebody turns on a light. In the rolling belly of the dustoff the wounded cling to one another in the dark, bathed in the faint red glow of collision-avoidance lights.

Outbound from a cold LZ we look out of the open cargo door at the stars, killer children with bloody brown faces. Our faces are coated with a film of sweat, dirt, and smoke. We're all half-naked, our pants and boots cut off by the medics, big white emergency medical tags attached to our utility jackets, crude red Ms grease-penciled onto our foreheads. We are a tired, raggedy-assed bunch of dying grunts wrapped in muddy ponchos and shot all to shit.

We squint but do not flinch when cold wind blasts in bard through the open cargo door and whips our dirty compress bandages into our faces and fires cold drops of blood through the air like bullets.

The chopper bits a downdraft and sudden suction from the slipstream pulls with power at the flopping white battle dressings and some of the bloody bandages are sucked out through the open cargo door and we leave a trail of little ghosts flying behind us in the sky.

The Proud Flesh

History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.
--James Joyce
Ulysses

Only the dead have seen the last of war.
--Plato

The wheelies are playing basketball in the white lie ward.

Recently amputated men play basketball to learn how to control their shiny new wheelchairs.

If you can play basketball in a wheelchair you can do just about anything. Except walk.

While nurses touch you from the voids which have no stars, you stand staring through a glass door at the energetic amputees. The doctors and nurses call the amputees "amps" or "ampies.

" The amputees, perhaps more in tune with reality, accept no slack, and prefer to call themselves "gimps."

The gimps are pieces of people with brains attached, strangely still alive, weaponless men who went off to war and interfaced with a hostile explosive device and were unlucky enough to get only half-killed. If suffering is good for the soul, then the Viet Nam war must have done the gimps a world of good.

Tough nurses force you to walk back to your own ward and lie down on a spiffy clean rack.

The rack is too soft for comfort after a year of sleeping on a reed mat in the back of the Woodcutter's hooch in the village of Hoa Binh, Viet Nam. For three months you have spent most of your time on this rack, in the prone position, locked at attention like a good Marine, a vegetable waiting to be put into the stew.

To starboard a sexy nurse is sponging off the quadriplegic Seabee. They've got the Seabee laid out like a clothing store mannequin in clean blue pajamas. The nurse with the sponge is Lieutenant (j.g.) Audrey Brown. Every guy in the ward with legs wants to jump her bones and every guy with hands tries to cop a feel.

The quadriplegic Seabee's last Darvon injection is wearing off. His nose is starting to ache now because they've stuffed his nose full of plastic tubes.

His jaw is wired. The only way he can express his pain is with his eyes. The nurses watch him real close because he's not a very happy guy and they think he might try to kill himself by biting his tongue off and swallowing it.

The Yokosuka Naval Hospital near Yokohama on Tokyo Bay in Japan stinks of alcohol. You sleep on a black-air pillow of painkilling drugs. You get glucose for breakfast and pretend you're having eggs.

While you eat through a hole in your arm you wiggle your fingers and your toes to verify that during the night some New Guy surgeon has not chopped off your hands and your feet. You feel lucky that you have avoided the abrupt surgery of land mine, shell, and booby trap, and the hassle of owning a flesh-colored prosthetic device, but you worry a lot about last-minute complications involving your extremities. After the war there's going to be a lot of people walking around with no feet and you have a pretty good idea that multiple amputees are not going to receive invitations to join the Pepsi generation.

They cut off a scout sniper's leg one night when his vein graft broke. He embedded his campaign ribbons into caramel candies and drank them down by chugging a quart of vodka.

Then he sang drunken songs to himself. As the pins on the ribbons cut open his stomach, he bled to death.

There are those we pray won't recover. Whenever one dies, we smuggle in beer and throw a party.

Lying around being a vegetable gives you a lot of time to think, and that's not helpful. Why did you go to war? They've been trying to figure that one out since Hitler was a Corporal.

You were young and the young love to travel. Now suddenly you're old and you just want to go home.

The walls of the post-op ward are eggshell white. Your pajamas are sky blue. Squid pecker-checkers in pea-green gowns and funny green shower caps patrol past the sixty beds in the ward, looking at clipboards through thick glasses and stopping to talk about you like you're not even there. If you speak to them they look at you like you're a chair that suddenly started singing "Moon River."

Lieutenant (j.g.) Audrey Brown finishes up with the quadriplegic Seabee and stops by your rack for a moment and fluffs your pillow like a moonlighting angel. She's very sweet to you, considering that relatively

speaking you are hardly even wounded. You've got shrapnel lacerations and a slight limp.

At Charlie Med back in Viet Nam they dumped your naked carcass onto a canvas stretcher laid across two sawhorses and surgeons dug a hundred pieces of pressed steel wire hand-grenade shrapnel out of your body. You're serviceable now and won't be surveyed back to civilian life as a circus freak or singing paperweight. Only now when you try to squeeze your pimples they don't come out white--like maggots--but are bits of black flaky charcoal with gray metal inside.

You've got what the doctors call "proud flesh" all over your face. Proud flesh is a special kind of scar tissue, the doctors say--the toughest kind.

First they tried some skin grafts using skin from a white Yorkshire pig. They found shrapnel.

They gave you the shrapnel in a plastic vial. But the pig skin refused to graft, and that was okay with you. Then they took some cuttings from your buttocks, sewed them on, stuck an I-V in your arm, hung a bottle over you, and waited.

While you slept, you had a dream in which you could hear the clicking of surgical tools.

Scalpels sliced off your face and the medical staff made sandwiches. Then they wheeled your gurney over to the new economical do-it-yourself amputation ward--for sergeant E-5s and below--where you were issued a rusty hacksaw and a bullet to bite on.

You have no complaints. You don't look so bad for a dumb grunt with his ass grafted onto his face. You look a little bit like Errol Flynn if Errol Flynn had ever played Frankenstein.

Lieutenant (j.g.) Audrey Brown smiles at you and her smile makes your shorts too tight. You think maybe you might love her a little bit if she were a little younger and not quite so strict.

She makes you eat green beans. You hate green beans. She puts giant Popsicle sticks into your mouth and looks into your mouth with an expression on her face like she's poking into a hole full of pond scum and rotten chickpeas.

Nurse Brown dominates you with needles and with big soft white tits that smell like talcum powder and fresh bread. Back when you wouldn't eat

your solid food she leaned down and let you look at them as long as you would allow her to spoon-feed you. Those were the good old days.

Now you are sorry when Nurse Brown's warmth moves away. She stops at the next bed to readjust the oxygen tent over the Crispy Critter.

The Crispy Critter to port is a tanker, an overflow from the burn ward. Somebody RPG'd his ride. He was trapped inside a burning tank. Ammunition cooked off in the storage racks and the tanker was thrown free by the explosion. They couldn't find a vein in the Crispy Critter tanker's charred arms, so they stuck the I-V needles into the tops of his feet. At night you can hear him plea bargaining with God.

They segregated me for a while, until the military intelligence pogues in S-2 got the story down pat the way they wanted it in the newspapers. Then I was transferred to the recovery ward.

In the recovery ward we get to eat nonliquid eggs for breakfast.

I bring six metal trays of food back from the galley and pass them out to the gimps. The walking wounded and the wheelies bring the nonambulatory wounded and the gimps hot chow and horse pill tranquilizers.

The snuffies hang tight together here in this forgotten place, and we take care of one another, every night, just as we took care of one another in Viet Nam, because there's nobody else we trust. God loved us, but he died.

Skillful surgeons and tireless nurses tend us by day, sewing up the wounds they can see. But at night we return to Viet Nam and wake up screaming. We piss napalm and cough up spiders. Nobody here but us vegetables, legless, ball-less wonders, more gargoyles for the museum, hire the handicapped-- they're fun to watch. Every night we fight to keep our brothers alive. Every night we suture up our gaping invisible wounds with black-light needles. Although we have malaria, we still maintain our area.

I do my impression of Mort Sahl, the political comedian. I hold a newspaper as a prop and I tell the story of how America was invaded by Eskimo Commandoes.

"So they were chubby little troopers, wearing fur hats with red stars on them. Rawhide parkas. Combat boots. They came in for a beach landing in battle-gray kayaks. They had scrimshawed bayonets of walrus bone, government-issue. And a K-9 Corps of penguins in flak jackets. They had rawhide bandoliers loaded with snowballs."

I get a few mild chuckles as I pace up and down the center aisle of the recovery ward.

Wounded people who think they might be dying are a tough audience.

"The Communist Eskimo Commandoes were ordered to blow up the TV-dinner factory near Laguna Beach, California. The Eskimo political commissars figured that without TV dinners half of the male population of America would starve."

Somebody way down at the end of the ward says, "There it is." He gets the big laughs. I hate it when amateurs get bigger laughs than I do.

I continue: "But they saw some California girls. All California girls over the age of nine are gorgeous honeys. It's a state law. If a girl turns sweet sixteen in California and she's not well on her way to being a stone fox, the California Highway Patrol escorts her to the border and exiles her to Nevada.

"So the Eskimo Commandoes started rubbing noses with the beach bunnies and lost all of their military discipline and political indoctrination in less than five seconds. The beach bunnies were like pink frisky seals and promised to take off their bikinis if the Eskimo Commandoes would denounce Karl Marx. The chubby dupes of Moscow agreed, and then everybody sat down in the sand and ate corn dogs. The Eskimo Commandoes soon discovered that, unfortunately, the Laguna Beach sand angels were all deformed freaks. The good news was that they were biologically accommodating."

Someone says, "How were they deformed freaks?"

I say, "They all had breasts that were bigger than their heads."

Through the moans and the groans, someone says, "Okay, so then what happened?"

I say, "Oh, I don't know. The usual thing. They told Eskimo jokes."

Noon. The quadriplegic Seabee has visitors from back in the World. They come down the aisle through the ward with high heels tapping, looking neither to the right nor the left.

There's his mother, dabbing her nose with a paper napkin. And his father, who looks lost.

And his girlfriend, all big ass and chunky legs and smelling like a graveyard for dead flowers.

They talk to the quadriplegic Seabee a lot but they don't say anything. The Seabee looks relieved that his jaw is wired together so that he couldn't talk even if he wanted to.

When the visitors from home leave, his girlfriend, sobbing, lags behind, savoring her big moment as the heroine in a soap opera on TV. She says, "Bobby, I'm sorry." She takes off her gold engagement ring with a diamond in it the size of a grain of sand and places it on the foot of his bed. She hurries away, reeking tragedy from every pore of her fat little body.

Later on that afternoon some pogue Admiral in a hat with gold scrambled eggs all over it comes in with about five hundred photographers and pins medals for heroism under fire and Purple Hearts on us while we are helpless to resist.

I get a Silver Star and a Purple Heart, but they don't say why. Probably some pogue made a clerical error.

When they come to the Crispy Critter tanker, the weight of the Navy Cross hurts his chest.

They pull the medal off of his pajamas and pin it to his pillow.

"AH-OO! AH-OO!" says Ranks, announcing his arrival deep in his diaphragm with a traditional Marine Corps "bark" that is like the love call of a horny gorilla. Ranks is a Lance Corporal from Motor T. He pushes a gurney piled high with magazines and paperback books down the ward. He stops at each bed to chat and to proudly show off his rank insignias to any New Guys.

Everyone salutes him and he returns their salutes.

Ranks was blown up by a booby trap planted inside his truck's engine. Some VC sapper used fifty pounds of officers' metal rank insignias stolen from an American PX as shrapnel for a bomb. When Ranks opened up the hood of his truck to check his engine, he got a face full of brass.

A black grunt with a bandaged head is telling a cute Japanese student nurse a sea story about the first time he got hit.

"This is no shit," says the grunt head-wound.

Noting the confusion on the student nurse's face, Ranks translates: "This is a true story."

"The Six souvenired our herd a C-A op in a beaucoup number ten thousand hairy A-O."

Ranks says, "Our commanding officer assigned our military unit a combat assault in an unusually scary place."

"The cannon cockers checked fire on the arty prep and Huey gunbirds standing by hit a hot Lima Zulu."

"After an artillery bombardment, armed helicopters carrying Marine riflemen landed under heavy fire."

"A B-40 sucking chest wound wasted my bro."

Ranks translates: "My friend was killed when shrapnel from a rocket-propelled grenade hit him in the lungs."

"The Kid took A-K rounds B-K T&T."

"Rifle bullets went through my leg below the knee."

The black grunt head-wound says, "Payback is a motherfucker. "

Ranks explains, "What goes around comes around.

The grunt continues, "Phantoms pickled ordnance, snake and nape. Cobras peppered the treeline, want some, get some, here's a little money from home for yo' zipper-head mama, Mr.

Charles."

"Our fighter-bombers dropped bombs and napalm on enemy positions effectively and then helicopter gunships strafed enemy military personnel and their mothers."

The grunt concludes his sea story by saying, "A dustoff dee-dee'd friendly Whiskey India Alphas to Charlie Med, most ricky-tick. Them chuck squid pecker-checkers were number one.

"A medical evacuation helicopter," says Ranks, "flew American battle casualties to a battalion aid station without delay and the treatment by Naval personnel was excellent."

The Japanese student nurse smiles at the black grunt, then at Ranks, shrugs, and haltingly says, "I'm very sorry. I do not speak English."

As the confused nurse walks away, Ranks and the black grunt head-wound laugh and say,

"There it is, bro. Sorry 'bout that."

Stepping over to my rack, Ranks says, "Hey, joker, m'man, my bird is coming out!" He points to his cheekbone. A silver eagle with spread wings is embedded just below his left eye, a silver shadow just beneath the surface of his skin.

Ranks has got a brigadier general's star of glittering silver in his jaw and gold and silver oak-leaf clusters in his neck and silver railroad tracks embedded in his forehead. His whole body is full of metal. When they cut open his chest they found a ball of lieutenant's bars as big as a man's fist, miniature bullion, a pirate's treasure of silver and gold.

"Outstanding, Ranks," I say, saluting.

Ranks returns my salute and pushes his gurney on to the next bed.

"AH-OO!" says Ranks, "AH-OO! AH-OO!"

Now that I'm out of the recovery ward, every Thursday at 1600 hours I go get my head gear oiled by a shrink.

A Navy psychiatrist is to psychiatry what military music is to music. No fucking pogue lifer questions Command. Even the chaplains are on the team. The job of a milita psychiatrist in time of war is to patch over any honest perceptions of reality with lies dictated by the party line. His job is to tell you that you can't believe your own eyes, that shit is ice cream, and that you owe it to yourself to hurry back to the war with a positive attitude and slaughter people you don't even know, because if you don't, you're crazy.

Five minutes after I met my shrink I psychoanalyzed him as a weakling and bully who was always chosen last for baseball teams when he was a kid and who glories in the power he can exercise in the doctor-patient relationship, in which he is always the one who gets to be the doctor.

I hate his crisp clean khaki uniform. I hate his deep masculine voice. I hate him because he is everybody's counterfeit father.

Lieutenant Commander James B. Bryant drones on: "You are merely identifying with your captors. It's an old, old story. It really is not at all uncommon for hostages or prisoners to come to admire-"

I say, "Man, you are so out of date, even your bullshit is bullshit. "

Commander Bryant leans back in his blue-gray swivel chair and smiles. The smile is half smirk and half smug superiority and half shit-eating grin. "What are your gut feelings about the enemy, now that you're free?"

I say, "Who's the enemy?"

With either the patience of a saint or the arrogance of a saint--with saints it's always hard to be sure--he says, "The Viet Cong. Define the Viet Cong for me."

"The Viet Cong are scrawny rice-munching Asian elves."

The Commander nods, picks up an unlit pipe, and chews on the stem. "I see. And how do you feel about having done your duty to your country in your three tours in Viet Nam?"

I say, "Being young is the art of survival without weapons, but we had weapons, and we used them to burn Viet Nam alive. I'm ashamed of that. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time, but it was the wrong thing. In an unnecessary war, patriotism is just racism made to sound noble."

"But soldiers in all wars have "

"John Wayne never died, Audie Murphy never cried, and Gomer Pyle never dipped a baby in jellied gasoline."

"I see," says Commander Bryant, making a little note on his little notepad.

I say, "Why is it so important to you that I be crazy?"

The Commander pauses, then says, "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Look, read my lips. I was a soldier in the Liberation Army. I lived in a Viet Cong village with Viet Cong people. I was never tortured. I was not brainwashed. They never even questioned me. They knew more about my area of operations than I did. I fought against the enemies of the people of my village and I'm glad I did it and I would do it again."

Commander Bryant smiles. "Of course you did." He makes a note.

"You know I did."

"Typical messianic complex."

"See? I can't talk to you. You're not real. You're just a box of words."

The Commander says, "Let's say for the sake of argument that you did in fact defect to the Communists. And that you may have killed American military personnel."

I say, "People. I may have killed people. It was my gun, but you pulled the trigger. And I never defected to the Communists. Communism is boring and does not work. But if the federal government of the United States died, I'd dance on its grave. I've joined the side of people against the side of governments. I've gone back to the land. When Americans lost touch with the land, we lost touch with reality. We became television. I don't want to be television. I'd rather kill and be killed."

"But how can you morally justify trying to kill your own people?"

I say, "How can I morally justify trying to kill anybody of any country? I killed Viet Cong soldiers, but I didn't kill them because they were evil human beings. I killed them because I believed they were wrong. It's not personal. The War for Southern Independence proved that you don't have to hate people to fight and kill them. The Americans I fought were not bad men. They were some of the finest looters and killers I ever run with. But they were on the wrong side. You have to shoot a rabid dog, even if it's your best dog. I've been loyal to what's right and I have been betrayed by my country."

Commander Bryant throws his pencil onto his desk. "You can't seriously expect me to believe that."

I stand up and walk to the wall. I take down one of the doctor's many medical diplomas. I select one that has fancy printing on it that looks like the icing on a wedding cake. "Well, you can believe it, not because I said it but because I did it." I turn the diploma over, slide out the cardboard backing, and pull out the diploma. "Action is expression. Attitude is posing."

I fold the diploma. I say, "I have been a prisoner of the war, and that has given me a very bad case of existential jet lag, profound and permanent. Ordinarily, I'm not one to hold a grudge, but I am a Viet Nam veteran and the White House has murdered forty thousand of my friends."

The Commander watches me, his mouth open, with just a trace of trembling in his sweaty upper lip.

I fold the diploma into a paper airplane. "War makes you nervous, but it also provides you with opportunities for therapeutic action." I throw the paper airplane across the room. The paper airplane lands on the Commander's desk and crashes into his second-place trophy from the Cape Cod Yachting Club.

The Commander grits his teeth and says, "You are a traitor in time of war." He slams his palm down hard on his desk. "With paranoid psychotic tendencies."

I say, "I'm not a traitor in time of war. War has not been declared by Congress. There is no war. Only the muscle flexing of an Imperial President. The thing I don't like about pogues is that you love rules, but not logic. I renounce my right to citizenship in an idiot's world. Your ignorance

is as hard as iron. And it is willful ignorance, ignorance by choice and by design.

Of course, more than one person has accused me of having a bad attitude. But don't worry, you fucking pogue lifer, you're safe, the pogues always win, sooner or later. Nobody likes a man who means what he says. In the land of mutants, plain talk is deadly poison and the man who means what he says will be hanged."

"You, Private, are clinically insane."

I laugh. "I roger that I've been hitting Maggie's drawers in my wild shots at sanity. Was Colonel Tibbets insane when he dropped a bomb on Hiroshima and vaporized a hundred thousand people? No, Doc, I'm only half crazy. If I have survived--and I'm not sure I have survived--it's only because I have a genius for staying only about half crazy."

Commander Bryant suddenly jerks open a desk drawer and digs out a manila file folder. "Oh, really? Well, smart guy, take a look at these photographs and tell me what you see."

The first dozen snapshots are of dead Marines photographed where they fell in the field in Viet Nam.

I say, "Can I keep these?"

"Of course. But why?"

"I want to show them to civilians back in the World. A picture is worth a thousand words." I put the snapshots into the cargo pocket of my utility trousers.

Commander Bryant opens another desk drawer and brings out a brown file folder. He pulls out a handful of eight-by-ten glossies and drops them onto the desk in front of me.

I flip through the photographs. Bad lighting. Obviously the pictures were made in a morgue.

A dead man on a slab. The dead man is my father. "Your mother has already remarried."

Commander Bryant says, "Yes. You killed him. That's right. You killed him. He killed himself. He died of shame."

I say, "You're wrong. My father trusts me."

Commander Bryant is astonished. "Is that all you've got to say? Come on, let's hear your smartass comeback to those pictures. "

I place the photographs back into the brown file folder and I drop the file folder onto his desk.

"Do not take prisoners," I say, "and do not allow yourself to become one."

Walking back to the transient barracks after visiting Ranks and the quadriplegic Seabee and the Crispy Critter tanker in the recovery ward, I see some Navy hospital orderlies standing in a group, smoking cigarettes, and watching a Marine grunt who won the Congressional Medal of Honor at Con Thien. The grunt has a flesh-colored plastic leg. He's pulling a shit detail, policing up cigarette butts.

The squid orderlies laugh and smoke their cigarettes and make remarks, just loud enough to hear, and they thoroughly enjoy that unexplainable gut-level poisonous hatred that men who have skated being in a shooting war can sometimes feel for less fortunate men who have been forced to meet themselves face to face in battle and have survived.

Like a woman who has never given birth, the man who has not faced death and inflicted death will for all of his life feel somehow not quite complete. Combat veterans are completely puzzled and bemused by the strangers who try to start fistfights with veterans in bars to prove how tough they are. Macho civilians envy the veteran for something the veteran, or at least some veterans, would be only too happy to transfer, or get rid of, like bad memories, or a plastic leg.

The soldier's war comes and goes, and ends. But noncombatants search endlessly for substitutes for war and attach to war that esoteric glamor which always attaches itself to the unattainable. It's like talking to a race of people whose big disappointment in life is that they will never be survivors of the sinking of the Titanic, will never be one of the chosen few who can proudly say that he had his hands burned off in the crash of the Hindenburg.

Veterans quickly learn that the fantasies of aspiring war heroes and the realities of the experience of war, what you gain for a short time and what you lose forever, can never be bridged. As the Spanish say, there is only one man who knows, and that is the man who fights the bull.

I greet the limping Marine policing up cigarette butts and we give each other a thumbs-up.

Last night a Recon buck sergeant who made the decision that the rest of his life would not be life locked himself in the laundry room and hanged

himself with his pajama bottoms.

Marines know how to die without wasting anybody's time. Vein grafts break in the night.

Grunts cough up pieces of metal and die. Nineteen-year-old boys go yellow in the face, then gray, and don't say a word. The orderlies find them in the morning.

If you want to make a sculpture of a Marine who has been blown away and fucked up totally, all you have to do is drop a living brain onto a pile of raw hamburger meat on a gurney and hammer the whole mess through and through with railroad spikes and ten-penny nails. Then you set fire to the brain.

Now when I visit my friends in the recovery ward I try not to look at the things in the beds, because I've been here before and I know the question they all want to ask: Will any of us ever be human again?

The clerk at casual quarters says, "S-2 called, joker. Your orders are in. I picked them up for you."

I say, "Thanks, bro." The clerk hands me a manila envelope, then bows.

The casual company clerk is wearing a red silk kimono sewn with white tigers and blue dragons. On his feet are black leather combat boots, without laces. The lump under the kimono is the colostomy bag that hangs under his arm. The North Vietnamese Army pulled his intestines out and stomped them into the dirt. For the rest of his life the clerk will shit through his armpit into disposable plastic bags.

The clerk once said to me, "I've been in a war and I've been in a hospital. That's my life."

I look at my orders. Somebody in the chain of command finally made a decision about me and cut me some travel orders. I'm not going to be shot. I'm being given an honorable discharge as a Section Eight, a medical discharge they give to crazy people. I've got a lot of money on the books in back pay for the time I was a prisoner of war. I'm to report to the Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro, California, for immediate discharge.

Bowing to the company clerk, I say, "Go easy, bro. You owe it to yourself."

As usual, the company clerk is smiling. He has always been an easy audience for my jokes.

The casual company clerk smiles a lot because he no longer has any lips.

I walk over to transient barracks, wondering if maybe my orders could be some kind of clerical error, like when they let that lady out of the deathcamp by mistake.

The barracks is deserted. Transient barracks in casual company is always deserted because the garrison squids see transient Marines as slave labor on the hoof and nobody wants to be press-ganged into some shit detail or working party.

Most of the racks aren't occupied and the mattresses are bent double on bare springs.

While I'm packing a small AWOL bag for outposting, two civilians in cheap Hong Kong suits come into the barracks.

One guy is young, tall, slender, tanned, and has perfect white teeth. He has blond hair, blue eyes, well-developed muscles, and he reeks with good health and vitality.

The other spook is middle-aged, with reptilian eyes, jowls, and the exaggerated black brow line of a Neanderthal.

The perfect team: the Surf Nazi and the Missing Link.

The Surf Nazi says, "We talked to your head doctor about you, boy. He says you threatened to make a stink, request mast, go to the newspapers, if we kept you in an isolation ward, or if we tried to shitcan you on a DD--a dishonorable discharge."

I say, "So who the fuck are you? CIA? NSA? G-2? S-2? FBI? Staff Counter-Intelligence?

Consulate representatives? Office of Special Assistants to the Ambassador?"

"N.I.S.," says the Surf Nazi.

"Yeah," echoes the Missing Link. "We're N.I.S."

I squat, Vietnamese-style. I say, "Naval Investigative Service." I laugh. "More spooks."

Using a window as his mirror, the Missing Link takes quick puffs on a cigarette while he clips his nose hairs with shiny little scissors.

The Surf Nazi says, "You're gonna pull brig time. You are guilty of violating Article 104 of the Uniform Code of Military justice: aiding the enemy and misconduct in the face of the enemy. Both carry the death

penalty. We could shoot you, boy. I'm talking firing squad. We will Eddie Slovik your ass. We got you on a charge of soliciting American soldiers to lay down their arms. Yeah, so you pulled a little tour of duty with the pajama boys. Well, we are going to deep-six you for collaborating with the enemy in time of war. Davis, you're history."

I say, "I didn't collaborate. I joined up. I enlisted."

"Then you confess that you're a traitor to your country?"

I say, "I confess that I'm a traitor to the federal government. The federal government is not the country. It likes to think it is, and it damned sure wants honest citizens to think it is, but it's not. I believe in America more and have risked more for America than any incestuous nest of parasites who call themselves Regulators. Thomas Jefferson never dropped napalm on peasants. Benjamin Franklin did not shoot students for protesting an illegal war. George Washington could not tell a lie. My government of self-righteous gangsters makes me ashamed to be an American. I secede from your Viet Nam death trip."

The Missing Link says, "We will court-martial you for treason. We will keep you here on bad time for-fucking-ever, sweetheart. We will red-tape you to death."

"Get out of my face, you pathetic simpleton. What are you going to do, send me to Viet Nam?"

The Missing Link puffs away inside a cloud of cigarette smoke.

The Surf Nazi opens a window.

The Missing Link says, "You're freezing me. You're driving me crazy, always opening windows."

The Surf Nazi says, "You're poisoning me. You're giving me cancer.

"It's low tar!"

"I don't like the smoke , says the Surf Nazi. "It stinks."

The Missing Link puffs.

The Surf Nazi says, "Show him."

"No," says the Missing Link, "I don't want to show him. I don't like him."

The Surf Nazi says, "Go on. Show him. I'm hungry."

The Missing Link grumbles, says, "Yeah, I guess I'm hungry too." He pulls some papers from the pocket inside his coat and gives them to me.

The papers are Xerox copies of newspaper clippings from half a dozen big newspapers. The headlines say: MARINE PRIVATE

CAPTURED and TORTURED BY CONG and BRAINWASHED BY COMMUNISTS and WAR HERO DEEP-SIXED ON SECTION EIGHT. One clipping features a photograph of me proudly accepting a Silver Star. Some big General I never saw in my life is pinning the medal to my chest. The headline reads: GYRENE POW HERO AWARDED MEDAL FOR

VALOR.

My father's death was not from shame. I'm a hero.

The Surf Nazi says, "Talk to the newspapers. Tell them your delusions. Try to be a guru for the hippie scum that is protesting the war. Would the Marine Corps make a hero out of a defector? You're brave, you're loyal, but you're a little bit confused, that's all. And understandably so. You're just not packing a full seabag, boy. You're one sandwich short of a picnic."

I say, "I understand. You're afraid to admit that anyone might choose to fight you. Might give people ideas. No American soldier can ever be portrayed as resisting the government of America, because too many people would ask why, too many people would ask what went wrong, and there are no erasers on spook pencils."

The Surf Nazi grins. "There are no spook pencils. There are no spooks. We're not even here."

"Not even here," says the Missing Link. He paws through the shaving gear on my rack. My rack is so squared away that you could bounce a quarter off the blanket. The Missing Link examines my razor blades, then picks up a letter addressed to my mother telling her I'm still alive and coming home in one piece. We don't have a telephone on the farm.

I say, "Put that letter down, dick breath, or you will be wearing a stump sock on your neck."

The Missing Link looks at me, says nothing, takes a puff on his cigarette, then drops the letter onto my pillow.

"Let's eat," says the Surf Nazi. Then to me: "We'll be watching you."

As the spooks turn to go, the Missing Link says, "Yeah, be watching you."

I say, "And we will be watching you."

The flight on the Freedom Bird from Japan to California inside Fortress America is an eighteen-hour fantasy for two hundred lean and tan Viet Nam

veterans. Lots of cold beer and round-eyed stewardesses.

War may be a Cinderella story in which men turn into soldiers, but being discharged at El Toro Marine Corps Air Station south of Los Angeles is a dull and tedious cattle call from big white squad bays to Quonset huts all over the base to the red brick HQ and then back again.

Medical examinations. Lots of miscellaneous spit and polish stateside bullshit. Pay records cleared--I get a year's back pay. We drop our skivvies and draw our pay and it's hero to zero in eight hours flat, out of the Green Mother and back in the World.

We know we're on our way to being civilians when we're sent to an auditorium and the Los Angeles Police Department gives us a recruiting speech.

After the recruiting speech we're ordered to go to the building next door for the next step in our processing.

Inside the building, pogues sit at desks, shuffling papers like battery hens awaiting the laying urge.

A pogue clerk lifer with his eyes on his paperwork shoves a sheet of paper at me without looking up. "That's your DD 214," he says. "Hang on to that."

I wait. The pogue clerk ignores me.

I say, "Okay, pal, so what's the next stop?"

"What?"

"Processing. Where do I go from here?"

The pogue clerk looks up and sighs. He has the fucking pogue lifer's weird blend of arrogance and incompetence, the surly smirk of the punk who is unaccountable and knows it.

He's old, and tired, and he doesn't look like anybody. He says, "Jesus." He frowns. His face is fishbelly white and spotted with red acne. "That's it, dummy. You're out." He says, very slowly, in the whining voice of somebody's smart-mouthed kid brother, "Do . . . you . . .

under . . . stand?"

I say, "That's it? That's all?" To his sneer I say, "Hey, bro, cut me some slack. This is my first discharge."

The pogue looks down at his paperwork, pouts, ignores me.

I turn and start for the door. When I put my hand on the doorknob the pogue says, "You got to have your papers stamped if you want to get off the

base."

I turn around and walk back to the counter. "What?"

The pogue holds up a rubber stamp. "You got to have your papers stamped if you want to get off the base."

"So stamp them. What's wrong, your arm broken?"

The pogue pouts, says nothing.

I say, "Would you like to have your arm broken?" But I do not unscrew his head and sbit down his neck. That's not my job. Not anymore.

The pogue is coy. "I can't stamp your papers. Your papers are not in order. "

"What's wrong with them?"

"They're not in order."

I stand at the counter, opposite the pogue, and I do nothing. I wait. I don't protest.

Perhaps the eternal appeal of war is that the pogues are all in the rear. In the field in Viet Nam I would trust a grunt with my life even if I had never met him and didn't know his name.

It's pretty to think that there are some pogues out there somewhere who are dittybopping into a crew-served weapon, but that kind of thing never happens, because pogues know how to avoid a fight. Pogues know how to get good men to do their fighting for them. Then, when the going gets rough, the red-tape soldiers sneak away in the night and cozy up to their Swiss bank accounts.

Little Hitlers, Wally Cox Nazis, pogues rule the world not by courage or ability but by sheer weight of numbers, cultivated inertia, flattering myths revered in common, and an undying loyalty to an ignorance as hard as iron. They have killed all of the tigers and the rabbits are in charge.

I wait. I don't argue.

The fucking pogue lifer says, "I'll give you a break. This one time. But next time, I'm warning you, you better have your paperwork in order before you come in here."

Paper rattles under the pogue's fingers. The pogue brings the rubber stamp down hard on my medical discharge with the authority of a thunderbolt from God.

"Okay," I say, "we're done. You can slip back into your coma now."

As I leave the Quonset hut, trying to figure out the meanings of the papers in my hand, I hear the fucking pogue lifer reply to a comment from someone in the rear of the office. He says,

"Yeah. It was a dumb grunt. Just another dumb grunt."

Far in the rear of the office, someone laughs.

Outside, in the cold light of a counterfeit sun, I laugh too. I don't say to myself, "Well done, Marine." But I do say, "There it is."

Pulling a tour of duty in the military service of your country is like being put onto a chain gang for the crime of patriotism, except that on a chain gang you get shot if you run away and in the military you get shot if you stay.

Walking to the bus station, I contemplate my bleak and hopeless future, a future populated by surly file clerks, loyal company men, hall monitors who grow up to be cops, brainless civil servants, sexless schoolmarms and stern librarians and Hitler Youth meter maids, and a whole catalog of pasty-faced bureaucrats bloated up fat and sassy with money extorted from taxpayers by force, sopping up gravy they didn't cook. The whole damned world is ruled by fucking pogue liters and Viet Nam has taught me that my religion is that I hate pogues.

Still in uniform, I take a bus from El Toro to Santa Monica, California, via Los Angeles.

Sleeping on the bus, I have a dream in which Charlie Chaplin turns into a werewolf and vomits up the arm of a child. Part of me is bleeding in the dream.

Los Angeles is a big concrete refugee camp lost inside a Gordion Knot of freeways, a place where stores have iron bars over their doors and where bag ladies patrol the street picking up scraps.

Santa Monica is by the sea.

In Viet Nam, Bob Donlon never stopped talking about the glories of the Oar House bar. He made it into a legend.

On the wall outside hang two huge boat oars.

Inside, the Oar House is a dismantled carnival that has been glued onto the walls of a long narrow cave, a junkyard of the past and a museum of the bizarre. On the walls and ceilings hang branding irons, old movie posters, a brass diver's mask, a stuffed shark, a wooden wagon with a World War I German Iron Cross painted on the side, an old motorcycle, a canoe, a

stuffed wolverine, a stuffed muskrat, a stuffed baby elephant, life-size clown dolls, and a painting of a guy picking his nose and coming out with a miniature cheeseburger.

There's a lot of other stuff, but it's getting blurry.

The floor is an inch deep with sawdust and peanut shells.

Between chugging pitchers of beer I'm telling Katrina, a sexy German barmaid with hypnotic legs, who is as pretty as a silver dollar, the story of my life: "Like the Indians, we fight to stay on the land. On the land we are men. We are free. We don't need anybody. In the cities we are refugees. Katrina, the Indian agents gave government cattle to the Indians. Beef on the hoof. The proud Sioux warriors didn't know what to do with cattle. They didn't know how to kill them so they could eat them. When they got desperate, they stampeded the cattle and pretended they were buffalo, then rode them down and shot them with flint-tipped arrows. In refugee camps we have no dignity. We'll be forced to beg from the fucking pogue liters and live on their handouts. The pogues want us in the cities. They own the cities."

Katrina does not speak English well, so she makes a good listener. At some point in my babbling I ask Katrina to call Donlon on the phone for me. I give her the number. "Tell him the Joker says to polish his brass and present his ass, most ricky-tick."

Katrina calls, gives Donlon my Papa Lima, my present location.

By the time Donlon comes in with a hippie girl I'm a hammered Marine hanging on to the bar, throwing marriage proposals at Katrina like darts, and mumbling about Song and the Woodcutter and Hoa Binh and Johnny Be Cool.

Donlon and the hippie girl take me home with them and put me into bed.

At breakfast there is little time for a reunion.

"Welcome home, bro," says Donlon. He hugs me. He has grown paler and fatter. "Joker, this is my wife, Murphy."

"Hi, Murphy," I say. Murphy is wearing blue jeans and a leather vest with nothing on underneath. On the front of the vest are two yellow suns and jagged yellow lines. Murphy has very big breasts and sometimes you can see a brown half-moon of nipple. Murphy is not a pretty woman, but

she is very earthy, very attractive. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't smile. She walks over, hugs me, kisses me on the cheek.

"Let's go, Murphy," says Donlon. "We're late."

Donlon safety-pins a white band of cloth bearing a blue and red peace symbol around his bicep. Murphy puts on an armband that says MEDICAL AID.

"Make yourself at home, Joker," says Donlon. "We'll be back tonight, maybe late."

"Where you going?"

"Federal Building in Westwood. Protest by the VVAW."

"The what?"

"The VVAW. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War."

"I'll go with you."

Donlon says, "It might get violent."

I laugh. "If you're going, I'll go with you."

Murphy goes into the bedroom and comes out with a logger's shirt and some faded blue jeans.

"You can wear these."

I say, "No. But thanks, Murphy. I'll wear my uniform. I'm proud to be a Marine."

Donlon laughs. "Lifer!"

I shrug. I say, "Once a Marine, always a Marine."

During the drive to Westwood in Donlon's orange Volkswagen bug, Donlon says, "We sort of been expecting you to visit. We saw your picture in the L.A. Times. It said the Crotch souvenired you one Silver Star for being an outstanding and squared-away POW. All of the guys were glad to hear that you were a POW. The Green Machine had you down as MIA, but we all know what that means. We figured the gooks had planted you in a tunnel wall somewhere north of the Z."

I say, "What a pretty picture."

Murphy says, "It must have been bad over there, as a prisoner. "

I say, "No, it wasn't so bad.

Donlon says, grinning, "So did you ever meet the Phantom Blooper face to face?"

I say, "Does a teddy bear have cotton balls? Does Superman fly in his underwear?"

Donlon says, "Bullshit."

I say, "No, that's straight skinny. The Phantom Blooper and I were tight. We used to hang out together down at the Viet Cong E.M. club."

Donlon laughs. "There it is."

Before we get to the Federal Building, Donlon brings me up to date. Donlon is studying poly-sci at UCLA. Animal Mother is alive; he escaped from a Viet Cong prison camp in Laos. He's still in the Crotch, a lifer, stationed at Camp Pendleton.

Stutten lives in New Jersey and has a kid with a harelip.

Thunder is a cop with the LAPD and is a star sniper on a SWAT team.

Hand Job died of colon cancer at age twenty-two.

Daddy D.A. is an alcoholic working as a mercenary with the Selous Scouts somewhere in Africa.

Bob Dunlop joined the cancer-of-the-month club and is dying of cancer of the mouth.

Harris, the hillbilly, shot himself in the head, but didn't die. When people ask him if he served in Viet Nam, he denies that he is a Viet Nam veteran.

The Federal Building is so big that it dominates Westwood, the chic cluster of boutiques nestled against the campus of UCLA. Overlooking a vast veterans' cemetery that extends as far as the eye can see, the Federal Building looks like the Tomb of the Unknown Veteran.

On the front lawn along Wilshire Boulevard, thousands of people are massed in the sun.

There are banners and placards everywhere. A pretty teenaged girl's T-shirt reads: TO HELL

WITH NATIONAL HONOR--WE WON'T BE USED AGAIN. And I see a middle-aged woman carrying a hand-lettered sign that says: MY SON DIED FOR NIXON'S PRIDE.

Donlon parks the car ten blocks away and we walk back and join the crowd. We listen to a lot of fiery speeches. One vet says, "Viet Nam means never having to say you're sorry."

Another says, "Viet Nam is like a piece of shrapnel embedded in my brain."

Donlon steps up to the microphone and says, "I want all of the FBI informers in the audience to raise their hands."

Nobody raises a hand, but everybody looks around at everybody else.

One of the guys behind Donlon raises his hand. The guy has a red bandanna tied around his head. He says, "I confess!"

Everybody laughs.

Donlon says, "That's just the King, people." To the King he says, "Your Highness, sit your silly royal ass down." The King makes a courtly flourish with his hand and steps back.

Donlon continues: "Okay, now I want everybody who thinks that one of the individuals on either side of you is an FBI informer to raise your hands."

Everybody looks around and laughs as all hands go up.

Donlon does an about-face and addresses the Federal Building. "Yo, J. Edgar. How's it hanging?" Then, to the audience: "The FBI is the highest achievement of the federal civil service. It's the phone company with guns."

The audience laughs and applauds.

Most of the men in the audience have ragged beards and are wearing hippie beads, peace symbols, and military gear--mildewed boonie hats, faded utility jackets studded with unit patches and badges, representing all branches of the military.

Donlon reaches over and takes my arm and pulls me to the microphone. "This is Joker, a brother, just back from the Nam. Come on, Joker, say something funny."

I look at the audience and I think about what I should say to men who have gathered together to fight against their own war. When the silence starts to make me feel self-conscious, I say,

"You can't fight bayonets with songs."

Someone says angrily, "What does that mean?"

"Yeah," says the audience.

I say, "I mean that you people are warm-hearted, you're good people, but you are kidding yourselves if you think that slogans printed on gumballs are going to stop the Viet Nam war.

The audience grumbles, jeers, moves closer to the podium.

The King jumps forward and says, "He's right! Pick up the gun! Pick up the gun!" His face is wild. "Off the pigs!"

Donlon pushes the King back, says to me and to the crowd, "Joker, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War observes a strict policy of nonviolence.

We're not going to fight anybody.

Not even against Nixon, the skull-king of San Clemente." He taps his armband. "I'm a peace marshal. That means that it's my job to prevent any of our people from resisting arrest by any means except passive resistance."

I say to Donlon and to the crowd, "I wish you luck."

Before anyone can say anything there is a sudden flurry to port. We all look over there and we see a long double line of the biggest policemen in the world advancing, faces hidden behind tinted Plexiglas helmet shields. The policemen are carrying long walnut nightsticks.

Their uniforms are so blue that they look black. They attack, silver badges flashing in the sun like shards of burning metal.

The black lines merge and whack at the edge of the crowd with nightsticks, attacking without warning and without mercy. Before we can react, chaos breaks out as tear gas canisters are lobbed in from starboard, followed by a second double line of cops, a blocking force.

People run around in circles, trying to escape, choking on the tear gas.

I see Murphy frantically distributing damp dishrags to be used as primitive gas masks.

A ragged verse of the song "We Are Not Afraid" ripples through the demonstrators while white-helmeted tactical squads in blue flak jackets elbow their way through the trapped demonstrators, clubbing everybody. Some of the veterans lose their tempers and take swings at the cops with their fists while peace marshals try to restrain them.

The King picks up one of the slim gray tear gas canisters and throws it back at the police.

The smoking canister hits a cop in the kneecap and brings him down. This enrages the police even more.

I see Donlon and some of the other peace marshals begging the police to have mercy. The police ignore the peace marshals and hit them with their nightsticks.

I move toward Donlon and I hear a police Sergeant give the order: "Pound the shit out of everything hairy that moves."

The cops converge on a fifteen-year-old girl. The girl is wearing a boy's sweater. The sweater is gold-colored and has a black high-school varsity letter on it. One cop gets behind the girl and latches a bar arm control on her

throat with his nightstick, chokes her with his nightstick across her throat. Her tongue comes out. She's suffocating.

The middle-aged housewife with the MY SON DIED FOR NIXON'S PRIDE sign moves clumsily, pulls at the cop's arm, but he shrugs her off. The cop says, "Get away from me, bitch. You're next."

The housewife hits the cop with her cardboard sign. The cop releases the girl in the varsity sweater and allows her to collapse unconscious to the ground. Then he turns and hits the housewife in the face with his nightstick.

The cops reach the microphone, where twenty disabled Viet Nam veterans in wheelchairs are jammed together. The cops dump the crippled and legless veterans out of their wheel-chairs onto the ground and beat them with nightsticks as they try to crawl away.

I see Donlon trying to protect the wheelies and I'm right behind him, ready to kill. Donlon tries to talk to the cops, tries to reason with them, tries to calm them. But the cops are as reasonable as Brownshirts in Nazi Germany. When Donlon tells the cops that the crippled men are wounded veterans, the cops get even madder.

One cop turns and hits Donlon in the face with his nightstick. Donlon falls.

The cop who hit Donlon turns away and returns to beating the wheelies. The wheelies who have arms hold up their arms to block the blows.

As I move toward Donlon some cop involved in a violent struggle drops his helmet. I pick up the helmet, which looks like headgear for a Martian gladiator.

I charge the cop who hit Donlon. By the time he looks at me I'm already swinging the helmet and the helmet hits the cop's Plexiglas face shield and the face shield shatters and the cop's nose breaks and blood splatters the inside of the Plexiglas so that he can't see. While the cop takes off his helmet I get an armlock on his throat and I put my knee into the small of his back.

I say, "Drop the nightstick or I will break your spine.

Somebody lays a nightstick hard across one of my kidneys and it hurts and I fall down.

When the police handcuff me I'm spread-eagled on the deck. Donlon is lying next to me, unconscious.

A cop steps up to Donlon, says, "We're Viet Nam veterans too, asshole." The cop spits in Donlon's face.

Another cop says, "That boy is going to lose that eye."

The spitting cop says, "Yeah. Life is hard, then you die." And they both laugh.

I'm herded together with a hundred other prisoners of war. The pigs don't see us as people anymore. We are no longer American citizens. We're the Viet Cong. We're the enemy. We are dupes of Moscow. We are round-eyed gooks and we have no I.D.

Except for the guy they call the King. The King flashes FBI credentials at the cops and they let him go.

A blond cop comes up to me, looks me over. He is a snarling, sneering little shit. "Look.

Just lookie lookie," he says, and two more cops come over to check me out. Blondie taps my chest with his nightstick. "Look at this rack of fruit salad. He's got three Purple Hearts. But no stripes."

Blondie gets up in my face and says, "You make me ashamed to be a Viet Nam veteran."

I say, "You make me ashamed to be a human being."

The blond cop slaps his nightstick into his gloved hand. "Yes, this is starting to look like another case of resisting arrest.

Suddenly a cop, still wearing his helmet and with his face shield down, shoves his way past the three cops and says, "This one is mine."

The helmeted cop drags me away and throws me roughly into the back seat of a black and white prowl car with a rack of blinking blue bubble-gum machines on top. Inside, the car smells of vomit, whiskey, and cheap perfume.

As the prowl car pulls away, the blond cop and his pals wave goodbye to me and laugh knowingly. I feel like a Viet Cong Suspect who has just been invited along for a friendly little chopper ride.

I watch through the metal screen as the cop takes off his helmet and looks back at me, grinning.

Thunder laughs. "Joker, you piece of shit. Where the fuck did you come from? We thought the Phantom Blooper wasted your ass at Khe Sanh, the day before we pulled out. You're a real ball of tricks, man. You're a fucking magician."

Jerking myself clumsily up into a sitting position, I say, "Thunder, you fucking pogue lifer.

What the hell are you doing being a cop? It's good to see you, man."

Thunder shrugs. "Hey, man, maybe half of the guys in the department are Viet Nam veterans.

What can I say? It's a good job. Good pay. Twenty years to a pension. I ain't no Einstein.

They got me with the snipers. Only now I don't waste gook officers. I waste dirt-bags, junkies, and pimps."

I say, "Yeah, sure, and dangerous criminals like those people back there."

"Listen," says Thunder, looking back over his shoulder as he drives, "I hate that bullshit. I really do. Hey, Donlon is a friend of mine. I was looking for him when I found you.

Somebody told me he was hurt. I'm in the VVAW too, Joker, only don't tell them that downtown. Orders is orders."

I say, "How bad is Donlon hurt?"

Thunder says, "Listen, we'll go to this place I know. I'll get you out of those cuffs and we'll have a couple of beers. Give the fucking pogue liters downtown time to book the demonstrators. I'll call the station and find out where they took Donlon. I didn't see Murphy.

She must have got away."

"That's solid, man. Thanks. And thanks for the huss."

Thunder says, "Don't thank me, bro. We're family."

I don't trust myself to make a reply.

VVAW lawyers have Donlon out on bail in a couple of hours and Thunder drives me to the hospital in Santa Monica where they've taken him.

Thunder stays in the car. "I can't be seen talking to Donlon," he says. "I'll wait for you. I'll drive you to the airport."

I go in alone. Murphy is in the waiting area. Some other wives of vets are with her.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Murphy says, "Yes, thank you, Joker. I'm glad you're here."

I say, "Is he sleeping?"

"Yes." Murphy looks up at me, holding her feelings in. "He's lost his eye."

I don't say anything. Then: "I've got to go, Murphy. My family is waiting for me. They haven't seen me for three years."

Murphy stands up, hugs me. "I understand. It's okay. There's really nothing more you can do here. You'll keep in touch?"

I say, "Of course. Will you be okay? Is there anything you need? I've got some money with me, back pay."

Murphy says, "Thank you for the offer, but we'll be okay."

A nurse comes out of Donlon's room. The nurse is a sexy candy-striper with long blond surfer-girl hair and big blue eyes.

I say, "Could I just look in on him for a second?"

The candy-striper starts to say no, but Murphy touches her arm and the candy-striper says,

"Okay. But just for a second. Okay?"

I go into Donlon's room. He's drugged to the gills. One whole side of his head is bandaged.

His head is in a harness so that he can't move. His eye is covered with a Styrofoam eye-cup.

I stand by the bed. I feel like I'm back in the recovery ward in Japan.

Donlon opens his good eye and sees me. He's too weak to say anything.

I lift his hand off the bed and I hold his hand in a grunt handshake.

I say, "I wish you a lifetime of cold L-Zs."

The day after the peace rally in Los Angeles I'm standing in a dirt road in front of Cowboy's home in Kansas. It's twilight and I'm thinking about how Kansas is nearer to Oz and the Emerald City than it is to the village of Hoa Binh, Viet Nam.

Here in this vast ocean of swaying wheat, gold below and blue sky above, the air is clean and the silence is broken only by the flutter and warble of flights of sparrows. For a moment the war seems like a black metal fantasy, nothing more than a particularly noisy nightmare.

But even here in Kansas with my feet firmly set on American soil I can see Cowboy's face the moment before I fired a bullet through his head. He gave me the Lusthog squad, and when I took the squad from him he trusted me to protect the life of every Marine in the squad, even if I had to get wasted to do it, even if I had to waste another Marine to do it. I just wish it hadn't been him. I liked him. He was my best friend.

In my nightmares I see it over and over, but it's always the same. Cowboy is down, shot through both legs, his balls shot off, an ear off, a bullet through his cheeks has torn out his gums. Cowboy is being shot to pieces by a sniper in the jungle. The sniper has already mutilated Doc J.-for-joint, Alice, and Parker, the New Guy. Cowboy has shot them all in the head with his pistol and tries to shoot himself, but the sniper shoots him through the hand.

Then the sniper is shooting Cowboy to pieces so that the rest of the squad, led by Animal Mother, will try to save him and then the sniper can kill the whole squad, and Cowboy too.

One time each night Cowboy stares at me with eyes paralyzed with fear, and his hands open to me like language and I fire a short burst from my grease gun and one round goes into Cowboy's left eye and rips out through the back of his head, knocking out brain-wet clods of hairy meat. . . .

When you kill someone you own them forever. When your friends die, they own you. I am a haunted house; men live in me. Every time I dream about Cowboy the nightmare ends in a fearful splattering of blood and I wake up in a cold sweat, wanting to scream, but afraid to give away my position.

Now I'm on the other side of the planet, in a place where violent death is not the daily concern. This is Kansas farmland, where weather is God and the ripening wheat is life itself.

According to a rusty mailbox, Cowboy's parents live in an old Winnebago motorhome. The motorhome is roughly the shape of and has been painted to look like a sliced loaf of bread.

Off to starboard there's a small barn and a corral. In the corral is a beautiful white horse.

I step up onto the broken cinderblock that serves as a front step. As I knock on the aluminum door, Cowboy's horse watches me from the corral and snorts.

A woman comes to the door and invites me in.

Cowboy's parents are dirt farmers. Farm people feel that they are obligated to invite visitors to stay for supper, because it's only good manners. And it would be bad manners not to accept.

Because I am Cowboy's friend his mother cooks up a batch of Cowboy's favorite food: chili with Gordon Fowler's original Texas-style chili

seasoning. The chili has a lot of spicy Mexican things in it.

Nobody says anything when Cowboy's mother sets a place for him at the dinner table.

Mrs. Rucker says, "He always had his nose in some book about Texas. I guess Johnny always wanted to be from Texas. I don't know why." Stirring the chili slowly, she says, "He was a good boy."

When we sit down at the table Mr. Rucker invites me to say grace.

I lower my head and say, "We thank You, heavenly Father, for the blessing of this food. We ask You to bless our body strength in your glory. Amen."

The Ruckers say, "Amen.

We eat. I pull Cowboy's Stetson from my AWOL bag. "Here," I say, "I think you should have this."

Mr. and Mrs. Rucker look at the pearl-gray Stetson. It is sun-faded, battered, shrapnel-torn, and too much of the red clay of Khe Sanh has been rubbed into it for it ever to come clean. it still bears a black and white peace button.

Mrs. Rucker shakes her head. "No," she says, a little coldly. "It's yours now. You best keep it."

I put the Stetson back into my bag.

"They sent a Captain," says Mrs. Rucker. "He had a real bad sunburn. I gave him some lotion for it. He was a nice young man, very well spoken. Missing in action, body not recovered, he said to us. He said that they knew that Johnny was gone, but that his body was lost."

I don't say anything. I'm thinking that after what my bullet did to Cowboy's head, his body if recovered would have been sent back tagged "remains, nonviewable."

Mrs. Rucker says, "It don't seem right somehow that he ain't resting here at home near his people." She looks away. "We for the longest time figured how maybe he was still alive, maybe they made a mistake." She pulls a Kleenex from a cardboard box and blows her nose.

"I still get blue sometimes. I know it's wrong, but I got hate in my heart. I got hate heavy enough to carry to the grave. I sent them a good Christian boy and they made him into a damned killer. Then God's hand reached down and struck him."

Mr. Rucker says, "Them people lied to us. John Wayne movies murdered my son. Them pointy-headed politicians hung him up like a hog for slaughter."

Mrs. Rucker says, "I know that war was wrong. I know it. They were done wrong, all the boys. But he was still my son and I'm proud of him. Johnny was the best thing about this country."

Mr. Rucker says, "Where are your people, boy?"

I say, "Alabama, sir."

"Farm people?"

I say, "Yes, sir, we had a hundred and sixty acres in watermelons, but my dad had to go to work strip-mining coal. He died while I was in Viet Nam. I got a letter from my grandma.

She said he had a stroke. I guess he didn't take to coal mining."

"These are hard times," says Mr. Rucker.

"Yes, sir," I say. "Hard times."

After supper Mr. Rucker sits in a rocking chair in a faded gray work shirt and stares through steel-rimmed glasses at a glowing plastic log in the electric fireplace, and smokes his pipe.

The smell of the pipe smoke is pleasant and reminds me of the Woodcutter.

Mrs. Rucker and I sit on the sofa. The sofa is red, black, bloated, and ugly. Mrs. Rucker shows me the condolence letter sent by the Marine Corps. She says, "It was real thoughtful of johnny's General to take the time to write to us. They must have thought Johnny was real special."

I read the letter:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Rucker:

On behalf of the officers and men of the First Marine Division, please accept my deepest regrets and

heartfelt sympathy on the death of your son, Sergeant John Rucker, U.S. Marine Corps.

Although words alone can do little to console you in your great loss, I hope you will find comfort in

the knowledge that John died valiantly in the service of his country and his Corps.

If I may be of assistance to you, please feel free to write to me at any time.

Sincerely yours,

The letter is signed by the Commanding General.

I don't tell Mrs. Rucker that the condolence letter is a form letter. When I was a Combat Correspondent and pulled pogue duty in the Informational Services Office in Da Nang, I used to type them up by the dozens and sign them myself, forging the Commanding General's signature. No one man ever could have signed letters as fast as our men were dying.

Mrs. Rucker pulls an envelope from a thick stack of letters tied with a yellow ribbon. Mrs.

Rucker says, "This one came two weeks after they told us that Johnny was gone."

The envelope is marked FREE where the stamp should be. The letter inside is written in longhand on Marine Corps stationery, the cheap stuff they sold in the PX, a blue flag-raising-at-lwo-jima across the sheet, and a gold eagle, globe, and anchor at the top. It's a letter Cowboy wrote to thank his mother for a box of sugar cookies she'd sent in a care package. It is signed, "All my love, your green amphibious monster, Johnny."

Beneath Cowboy's signature are a dozen other signatures. The whole squad shared the box of cookies, so we all signed, thanking Mrs. Rucker. My name is first. At the bottom of the letter is a P.S.: "Don't worry about me, Mom and Dad. Joker will take care of me. I've got friends here, and we all take care of each other."

We sit, in silence, and all of the unasked questions hang in the air between us like black stone funeral wreaths. Why didn't I take better care of Cowboy? Why did I survive while Cowboy died?

After a while, I say, "Thank you, ma'am, for the supper. I enjoyed it. But I should be getting back on the road. I'm kind of anxious to get home."

"I know you are," says Mrs. Rucker. "But it's late. You're welcome to stay the night."

Before I can reply, Mrs. Rucker gets up and walks to the rear of the motorhome. "I'll fix up Johnny's bunk bed for you."

"Thank you," I say, knowing that my visit has been an intrusion, and thinking that Cowboy's parents don't seem to have known him very well.

Sometime after midnight I take Cowboy's guitar from the wall over his bunk and I go outside.

I sit on the corral fence. Cowboy's horse watches me with suspicion. Then the beautiful stallion trots across the small corral, ghost-white, sleek, and strong. The horse nuzzles my arm with his nose.

I sing a song that Cowboy wrote in Viet Nam to Cowboy's horse. The name of the song is

"Jukebox in the Jungle."

Cowboy's horse seems to like the song:

The lights out here ain't caused by crowded barrooms,
There ain't no jukebox in the jungle,
There ain't no honky-tonks in Viet Nam,
So, darling, when I got your Dear John letter,
There was no place to go to hide my pain. . . .

In the morning at first- light Mr. Rucker gives me a ride into town in his Datsun pickup truck.

I catch a bus to the airport.

It's only a short hop on a Delta 707 to occupied Alabama, the Heart of Dixie, where they talk so slow that if you ask them why they don't like Yankees, by the time they finish telling you, you agree with them.

My plane lands in Birmingham and I catch a Greyhound bus north a hundred miles to Russellville, the county seat of Winston County, the "Free State of Winston."

I sit in the bus, an unreconstructed Viet Nam veteran, and I watch the familiar countryside of low rolling hills and red dirt farms and cotton fields that go all the way to the horizon.

The South is a big Indian reservation populated by ex-Confederates who are bred like cattle to die in Yankee wars. In Alabama there is no circus to run off to, so we join the Marines.

History is a Frankenstein's monster puppet whose strings are manipulated by the White House. Indians are murderous red devils who spitefully built their villages on top of gold deposits and in the paths of railroads and were unwholesomely partial to captive white women. Confederate soldiers are un-wholesomely partial to black women and had nothing better to do than whip Uncle Tom to death and sell black babies down the river. The Russians, who have never fired so much as a pea-shooter at an American soldier, and who have never taken a cupful of American soil, and who lost twenty-five million people saving the world

from Adolf Hitler, are an Evil Empire spawned by Satan, and are our worst enemies on the planet. Because of our history, we drop bombs bigger than Volkswagens onto barefoot peasants twelve thousand miles from home and call it self-defense.

Black John Wayne saw it all: you can stay here and live with us in our constructed phantom paradise if you promise to pay lip service to the lies we live by. If you salute every civil service clerk who claims to be Napoleon, you may play in our asylum.

In America we lie to ourselves about everything and we believe ourselves every time.

Looking through the smoked glass of the bus window is like watching a movie. I see an abandoned black tarpaper shack with broken windows like open mouths. The inevitable stripped and rusting car bodies sit in the weedy front yard next to the inevitable collapsing tool shed.

I see scrub pasture being grazed by a bony red swayback mule.

Nothing but a few metal historical plaques remain to show that the Greyhound bus is rolling along a black strip of asphalt laid down over the graves of a defeated race of people who lived in a stillborn nation, rolling through a haunted region, over buried battles. It's Viet Nam, Alabama.

The South was the American Empire's first subjugated nation. We are a defeated people. Our conquerors have cured us of our quaint customs, quilting parties, barn raisings and hog killings, and have bombed us with revisionist history books and Sears catalogs and have made us over into a homogenized replica of the North.

The only visible relics of our conquered nation are crumbling brick walls and weed-grown fieldstone foundations and fluted white Doric columns being swallowed by swamp water.

Crumbling earthworks, trenchlines and gun emplacements, are silent now in the shades of forests of virgin timber, all garrisoned until the end of time by ragged, barefoot Confederate grunts, sweet old ghosts wailing to be understood.

But the Confederate Dream lives on. The Confederate Dream, a desperate and heroic attempt to preserve from federal tyrants the liberty bequeathed to us by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. Stubborn sinews of the Confederate Dream live on, deep in our genes, a dream recorded silently and permanently by the metal in this soil.

The Greyhound bus pulls into Russellville. My hometown is moving on the other side of a piece of glass now and looks like television. We glide past the Confederate stone soldier.

Beyond the stone soldier I can see a parade breaking up on a back street.

In almost every town in the South that is big enough to have more than one gas station a stone soldier of the finest Italian marble pulls guard duty in the center of town.

Our stone soldier is standing tall, leaning on a marble musket, staring intently at the horizon to detect the advance of Yankee armies.

For generations the stone soldier in Russellville stood his ground in the center of the main intersection in town. But after a drunk driver from Moline, Illinois, splattered his fancy little foreign sports car all over the stone soldier's marble pedestal, the old campaigner--one Yankee to his credit, confirmed--was shifted to a more strategic position across the road and onto the courthouse lawn.

I get off the bus at the courthouse. I say to the bus driver, a sexy young black woman with a red silk scarf around her neck, "Thanks, darlin'. Don't work too hard."

She grins. "You take care now. And welcome home."

Russellville is so small that I used to draw a crowd when I'd set up my old paint-spattered rickety stepladder in front of the Roxy Theater. Climbing up that baling-wired stepladder with an armload of foot-high red plastic letters of the alphabet to put up the title of the latest Elvis movie is probably the most dangerous thing I have ever done.

People are friendly in Russellville, and used to stop and talk to me while I placed the letters, to ask me what the next movie was, or to make fun of my spelling errors, so eventually I started talking back to them, and telling them jokes. Pretty soon I decided I was ready to be and wanted to be an actor in Hollywood. Of course, in Russellville it was easy to stand out and be a star. And it hasn't changed. It's still just a wide place in the road. It's still just another hillbilly half-town, clean and quiet, the kind of place that falls off maps.

I walk past the Roxy Theater, which was built in an old-fashioned design like fancy icing on a Technicolor wedding cake.

I walk into the parade as it turns a corner, breaks ranks, and dissolves into costumed people.

When I was in high school the most common kind of parade down the main street of Russellville was the parade of hot rods full of my friends, one hundred 1955 Chevrolets burning up the last remaining fossil fuels in an eternal looping back and forth through town, from the A&P parking lot SALE-SALE- SPECIAL-SPECIAL at one end of town and back to the King Frosty, beneath an ice-cream cone that had light inside and was as big as a man, and back again, yelling at everybody, giving the finger to the guys, banging on the side of your car at fifteen-year-old jailbait.

Every girl wore her boyfriend's varsity sweater and class ring. The girls put adhesive tape on the rings to make them fit. The big joke was to say, every time you saw a couple who were going steady and sat close together while cruising, "I wonder who's driving?"

I feel like a New Guy in my own hometown.

The band uniforms are of Napoleonic design, red longcoats and tall furry hats, brass buttons and brass buckles. Trumpets and tubas gleam like burnished gold sculptures.

As I scan their faces to see if there's anybody I know, the marchers fall out. The last few ranks continue to lift their knees in a fading reflex even after the snare drummers stop rapping out the cadence on the metal edges of their drums. The fat bass drummer unstraps himself from his drum and puts it down on the ground. The drum says: THE MARCHING 100.

On Main Street, farmers' wives without makeup and farmers who look at events and react, if they react at all, only with shy smiles, flow in converging currents along the sidewalks, heading for their cars and trucks. The men are tall and thin and tanned and wear faded blue overalls and brown felt hats. The women are plump and plain and wear cheap cotton dresses from Sears.

The drum majorette walks by with silver in her eyes, tooting absentmindedly into the silver whistle in her mouth, her perfect body molded by gold sequins. It's Beverly Jo Clark. I know her. But she doesn't recognize me.

She's gone before I can speak to her; she's like a dream come true.

Then come a dozen girls in red sequins and white vinyl cowboy boots, some idly twirling chrome bars with white rubber tips.

I speak to a girl behind one of the blinking batons. She's about seventeen, maybe a senior, but probably a junior. I say, "Hi. Don't I know

you?"

The girl looks at me, blushes, giggles, retreats toward her girlfriend. The girlfriend has Bette Davis eyes and Betty Crocker thighs. The two of them waddle away like baby ducks, sparkling red sequins and shiny batons glinting in the sun.

I say, "Wait . . . Don't you know me? I'm Jim Davis. Do you know Vanessa Oliver? Janice Tidwell? Yvonne Lockhart? JaDelle Steffanoni? Donna Murray? Jodi Corica? How about my baby sister, Cecilia Davis?"

The majorettes look back, giggling, embarrassed. They are staring at the scars on my face.

The girlfriend says, "You're too old for us, mister." And they laugh and strut away quickly, elbow to elbow, exchanging big whispers, both talking at the same time.

I've come a long way to get home, only to find out that it wasn't worth the price of the trip, only to discover that, bottom-line, I am ashamed. I am ashamed to call myself an American.

America has made me into a killer. I was not born a killer--I was instructed.

Russellville is a town that fears God and raises yearly crops of cotton, corn, and boys willing to die for the President.

As more farms fail, the town grows. The hearty yeoman farmers of Concord and Lexington Green, hard-working men who were close to the earth, are now refugees in the cities, begging for handouts from crooked politicians. In the country, a man made his living by hard work.

In the cities, you survive by guile, lying and stealing. Grunts work; pogues make deals.

Home. It hasn't changed. It just isn't the same anymore. It's not America anymore. I'm not standing in the country I was born in and I am not the person I was born to be. Drive-in movies don't show me pictures I care to see anymore. Ice cream tastes like clay. Breasts are coconuts with nipples of black rubber. I can't remember: When did I go there, and why?

And why did I come back? And where am I now? I don't know. None of us really know.

The world we knew just ran away, it's gone. And where are we? We're alone. That's where we are, bros, there it is, no slack, payback is a motherfucker, we are alone. Meanwhile, all around us, like bloated white

spiders, civilians cluster in their plastic shacks, polishing imaginary Cadillacs.

Walking the streets of the town I grew up in, I marvel at Black John Wayne's relentlessly perceptive vision of reality--a vision I had to struggle to attain in the Viet Nam war, but which Black John Wayne seemed to have been born with. He was right all along when he kept saying that, sooner or later, what politics comes down to is a nightstick upside your head.

They neglected to tell us that particular important piece of information in civics class at Russellville High School.

Sitting Bull once said, "The white men are smart, but they are not wise." Americans do not respect people. Americans respect money, power, and machines. The Vietnamese are poor, the poorest people on the earth, yet they have dignity, sensitivity, pride, and a sense of honor.

The Viet Cong live in a hellish world, and are happy. Americans have every luxury, and are sad. We're not morally bankrupt; we're in debt.

Americans have become, by imperceptible degrees, by the silent death of a thousand cuts, pathetic reservation Indians. Our Puritan heritage, our horror of everyday life, has always been a sickness, a disease dragging us down. Ultimately, the American vice and fatal weakness is pure uncut vanity. We turn our backs on the facts, and laugh. America arm-wrestles with God, confident of eventual victory. Meanwhile, trapped inside the reality of death like white mice in a jar of black glass, we damage each other mindlessly and without mercy and without even a concept of pity, in our futile attempts to escape. Even against time itself, Americans think we can simply send in the Marines.

Americans are prisoners of their own mythology, having watched too many of their own movies. If they ever want to send Americans to the gas chambers, they won't tell us we're going to take showers, they'll herd us into cinder-block movie houses.

In this country plain truth is as hard to find as Oswald's lawyer. Lost among our myths and dominated by our machines, we plug into the drug of our choice--sex, power, fame, money, booze, heroin--because we're afraid of the future, which is beyond our control. And our fear of the future makes us hate ourselves and makes us hate the work we do.

We spend our days moving pieces of paper from one side of the desk to the other. But it's just busywork, and we know it. We're all drawing the dole

from the men who own the cities and who own us, too, like cattle, lock, stock, and barrel. If the men who own the cities suddenly closed down the supermarkets and turned off the electricity, we'd all starve and freeze, and we'd cry and be lost and we'd be afraid of the dark, and the men who own the cities know that, and so they know the exact extent of their power.

Life in the cities costs more than your soul, sometimes much more. Sometimes it costs more than you can pay.

As a kid, I played war in these streets. I remember the screams and the war cries, the pock of light-bulb hand grenades and the clatter of the trash can lids we used as shields. Real war is exactly like it was when you played it as a kid. Until you get shot. When you get shot, it's different. Everything in life somehow ends up being different from what you've been told.

And when you learn that, when you learn to what monumental extent you have been bullshitted in the land of a thousand lies, something in you dies, forever, and something else is born. From that moment on, you're in danger. In the land of a thousand lies, to be an honest man is a crime against the state.

When you return to your boyhood town, you find that it's not the town you were seeking, after all, but your boyhood. I'm not standing in the same town I grew up in. My old hometown has changed. My real hometown has been taken away and a replica left behind. The sun was bought on sale at Sears and then stapled to the sky. The American hooches along the treelined street are colorful and unbelievably large. The lawns are neatly mowed, precisely trimmed. Translucent plastic grass like they put into Easter baskets has been manicured to within an inch of its life--the jungle tamed.

Cardboard leaves flutter lifelessly on cast-iron trees. And, down along Main Street, where the telephone poles are black and look like Tinkertoys, every building is gray. It's typical Downtown America--noisy, dirty, locked and barred.

My happy little hometown has been transformed into a brick and neon camp for round-eyed refugees.

Back in Hoa Binh, Song once said that Americans are like a man who marries his bicycle. He brings his bicycle into his house and sleeps with it. One day his bicycle breaks down. Then the man is afraid to take a trip, because he has forgotten how to walk.

Limping slightly, I walk the five miles to our farm, past the cotton-mill village, past acres of cotton fields.

When I see the farm it looks like a foreign place. Home. Home, that's what we were all fighting for in Viet Nam. Home was where we all wanted to be. We thought we knew where that was, but we were wrong.

There are no rice paddies in my father's fields. My father's fields lie fallow, spotted with big clumps of Johnson grass and a five o'clock shadow of ragweeds and thistles. In my father's fields there are no fields of fire. My father's fields are no longer strung with strings of dots that up close turn into fat round blue-green watermelons. And the only barbed wire is a two-strand boundary fence that needs repair.

I turn off the two-lane highway and climb through a gap in the boundary fence. I cut across the fields. I have worked and reworked every inch of this land, with mule-drawn plow, tractor, and hoe. I've had every ounce of this dirt under my fingernails.

I take a shortcut through a treeline that runs along a shallow stream.

I see a deer and the deer brings back memories of my childhood wars. In that treeline where the deer stands I stood tall with a Japanese bayonet my father brought home from World War II. I hacked my way through many summer banzai attacks of enemy saplings.

Later I squatted in the dirt and beat red ants to death with a rubber tomahawk. The red ants were Communists and I was Gregory Peck on Pork Chop Hill.

When I was twelve I got a .22-caliber single-shot rifle for Christmas and massacred squirrels, rabbits, and little gray lizards. But I would never shoot a deer.

A rack of antlers moves from the brush and there is the soft rhythmic tapping of hooves on a carpet of dry leaves. A stag appears, light brown with a white breast and white powder-puff tail, a rack of antlers of brown-yellow bone, and eyes too big and too human. The stag pauses, listens. He steps into the creek, drops his head, drinks from the softly flowing water.

I stand still and wait until the deer melts into the trees.

It's too late to go back to the land in America; the land doesn't want us.

I walk along the dry creek bed where I caught salamanders called "water dogs" and marveled at the transparent jelly of frog eggs on the bottoms of

wet rocks. Pebbles crunch under my spit-shined shoes like I'm walking on old bones.

Somewhere around here I buried my first pet, Snowball, who was run over by a drunken electrician driving a red pickup truck. I buried Snowball in a shoebox along with a wedge of cornbread and a note to God telling God what a good puppy he was.

I change direction into a meadow full of wild flowers the color of fire. The trees are booby-trapped, the soil is wired, and there is a sharp piece of metal inside every blade of grass. With one eye I scan the trees for snipers while my other eye X-rays the deck for punji pits and bouncing betty prongs. A patch of blackberry briars tears into my trouser legs like concertina wire.

I walk out of a treeline and for the first time in three years I see the house I was born in.

Our house is 140 years old. It was built by my ancestors with their own hands on the site of a log cabin built by James Davis in 1820. The 160 acres were awarded as a bounty land grant for service as a private under General Andrew Jackson. In 1814 James Davis fought at the battle of Horseshoe Bend and helped to slaughter Creek Indians so that Alabama could be stolen from them finally and forever. Nobody remembers who the Creeks stole it from.

The house is a mountain of scarred wood, weathered planks the color of pewter, newer planks like old ivory. The house sits on a fieldstone foundation, simple, unadorned, seemingly indestructible, the home of plain people.

Rusting by the barn are a manure spreader, hay mower, disk, rake, spike-toothed drag, and a grinder for mixing corn and oats for the pigs. It's sad to see good tools that have not been properly cared for.

As I walk into the yard of hard dirt, a little red bantam rooster we call Pig, because of how he eats, suddenly stops pecking and scratching and squawks and sputters across the yard in that clumsy wing-flapping that chickens call flying.

Ma is sitting on the front porch in her rocking chair, fanning herself with a cardboard fan that has a full-color picture of Jesus on the front.

Beyond the house, on the slope, Old Ma, wearing a faded blue sunbonnet, is working in her vegetable garden, repairing a scarecrow made

of gleaming aluminum pie pans and large clear-plastic Pepsi jugs. The scarecrow looks like a monster born out of trash.

The only melons I've seen on the farm so far are the dozen by the porch where we used to spit the black seeds.

Pig sputters by, chased by a big red hound dog.

Half of the hound's face has been eaten away by the mange. The old dog lopes along clumsily. His ribs protrude, curved and well defined.

My sister Cecilia, too tall for her body, all arms and legs, her hair cut short like a boy's, wearing blue jeans and a man's gray work shirt, and with a strand of pink plastic pearls around her neck, charges across the yard. She pauses to break a switch from a dead peach tree. She swats at the hound with the switch. She says, "Go home, you mangy old dog. We ain't got but one chicken and you can't have him!"

The hound stands his ground, crouches, snarls, flashes big yellow teeth, and his teeth make me think of the napalmed tiger we saw that night on our way to the Nung combat fortress.

Cecilia drops the switch, runs up onto the front porch and back into the house.

Within seconds she reappears, slamming the screen door behind her. She jumps off the porch. She walks up to the hound and kneels, shoving a white paper plate at the dog. On the paper plate are three greasy pink black-edged wedges of fried bologna and half of a fluffy white homemade biscuit.

The dog hesitates. Cecilia pushes the plate under the dog's nose. She picks up a piece of bologna and holds it out. The dog snaps at the meat, then gulps it down. While he eats the rest of the meat and the biscuit, Cecilia strokes his head. The dog growls deep in his throat, and eats faster.

I say, "Hi, Stringbean."

Sissie looks up and her whole face opens into a smile. "James!" She jumps up and hugs me.

I give Sissie a one-pound sack of candy corn. Holding onto the candy, Sissie climbs onto my back. I give her a piggyback ride to the house as she yells, "Ma! Ma! It's James! James is home! James is home!"

My mother stands up on the porcb, shades her eyes with her cardboard fan, and looks at me, puzzled. She says, "James? Is that you?"

Old Ma starts coming in from the fields.

Before supper I put my AWOL bag into my old room. It's the same room, only smaller, and airless, and my bed is a kid's bed, still covered with a quilt hand-sewn with big patchwork butterflies.

My microscope and the beakers, flasks, and test tubes of my chemistry set are coated with a fine film of dust.

There's a framed photograph of Vanessa, my high school sweetheart, signed T. S. T. S. A., too sweet to sleep alone. Vanessa used to write T. S. T. S.A. on the flap of her letters to me when I was in recruit training on Parris Island. My Senior Drill Instructor, Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim, a romantic, enjoyed making me eat her letters, unopened.

When I was in Viet Nam, Vanessa sent me a peace button I wore in the field, now on Cowboy's Stetson.

The only addition to my room is the framed boot-camp photo of a tanned, overly serious kid in dress blues. The kid has ears like an elephant. The photo used to be on the coffee table in the living room.

On the wall is a framed, knitted scene of Marines on Iwo Jima raising a Christian cross.

My books are all here, hundreds of books. Paperback books on apple crate shelves. But books can't help me now. I miss Hoa Binh and the rice fields. I miss being with people who have something to lose. All Americans have to lose are their American Dreams. Land stopped being worth fighting for when they turned it into real estate.

Standing in my childhood room I feel homesick. I feel like I'm in a motel.

For one moment, I am back in the triple-canopy jungle, surrounded by shadows that are the Viet Cong. And I'm reaching down in the torchlight to pull on the tooth of a napalmed tiger.

In one corner of the room is a wooden crate shipped from Da Nang. The crate has been opened. Inside, my loyal brothers at Khe Sanh have carefully packed my gear, including--duly tagged as a war trophy--my Tokarev pistol, the most highly prized souvenir in Viet Nam.

I snap a loaded clip into the Tokarev and drop it into my Stetson.

It feels so good to have a friend again.

At the supper table, we pray before we eat.

At supper I meet my stepfather, Obrey Beasley. He's as thin as a rail and his head is as bald as a baby's butt. He is wearing faded blue bib overalls

and no shirt. His arms are skinny, pale, and black with hair. He's got varicose veins in his nose and smiles too much and doesn't mean a damned word he says. He says, "I wish I could kill me some of them Communists!"

Obrey spits Bull Durham chewing tobacco onto the floor and says, "I read the letters you wrote to Pless from the war, boy. I think it was real smart of you to get that job that let you sneak out of the fighting, that writing job. That was slick. Got out of the Big War myself.

Claimed as I done my back. None of them Army doctors could show as how I weren't really laid up!" Obrey laughs, then returns his attention to the television set, which is new and in color, and has been moved into the dining room while we eat. "Was a assistant file clerk at TVA," he says. "My back problems paid off again. Got me a medical pension!"

For supper there's fried chicken, hot, golden brown, and sticky. There's a steaming bowl of green beans, flaky homemade biscuits too hot to hold, thick gravy, boiled potatoes, roasting ears of yellow corn, hominy grits, black-eyed peas, and cornbread. The rich smells from the food are both strange and familiar.

I peck at the food on my plate.

Old Ma nudges me, winks, says, "Your eyes always was bigger than your stomach."

My mother says, "I wish you'd wear your Army uniform to church come Sunday. They all been praying for you."

I say, "Ma, I just got home. And I'm not in the Army. I'm a Marine."

Old Ma says, "Boy, how come you didn't write us more letters?"

I say, "I been busy, Old Ma. Besides, I didn't know you could read."

Old Ma laughs. "Ain't nobody that busy." She kicks me under the table. "Go on and eat.

You look like something the cat dragged in."

My mother calls to Sissie on the back porch, "Sissie! You wash up, now. Come on to the table. Your brother's home."

"Okay," Sissie calls back. "I'm coming." And then she mumbles, "I didn't ask to be the last one born. . . ."

Ma says, "I guess you must of heard about Vanessa, your little girlfriend."

I say, "No. Is she okay?"

Ma hesitates. "She's married, James. She's pregnant. When they said you was missing she married one of the Hester boys. She come by Tuesday a week. Said she was real sorry. Said she wanted to tell you her own self, but she's scared."

I say, "Of what? Of me? Why?"

Ma purses her lips. "We got a letter . . . from the Army. . . . "

I say, "What letter? What did it say?"

Ma says, "I don't know. I got it put up somewhere. Or maybe I throwed it out. It said we was to be real careful around you for a while, that you were, well, that your mind wasn't right."

I say, "Those fucking pogue liters . . ."

My mother is stunned. "James! Don't you dare use that trashy language in my house!"

Before I can reply, Sissie comes in. She's wearing my Silver Star on her torn white T-shirt.

"Sissie, " says Ma, "don't you be messing in James' things."

Sissie struts around the table. "I found this pretty blue box in the trash pile. This shiny brooch was in it." Sissie hugs me. "Can I have it, James? Please? Pretty please with sugar on it?" It's the Silver Star they gave me in Japan.

I say, "It's yours, Stringbean."

She says, "To keep?"

I say, "To keep."

Sissie kisses me on the cheek the way Song used to. "You're the best brother I ever had." She grins. "Of course, you're also the only brother I've ever had." She sits down at the table and admires her shiny brooch.

"Pass the potatoes, please," says Old Ma.

Obrey grunts, burps, finally passes down a bowl of boiled potatoes that look like albino hand grenades. Old Ma sets the bowl down in front of Sissie. "Eat, girl. You got all day for playing with James' hero medal."

Obrey says, grinning in a friendly way, "Even a blind hog can root up an acorn every once in a while."

"Look, James," says Old Ma, nudging me. I look at the television. It's a news special about our boys in Viet Nam entitled, The Viet Nam Violence Freaks, jerky mini-cam movements and disconnected images of violence, a dinnertime feeding for civilians weaned on recreational gore.

Obrey says, "Cecilia, switch the channel."

On television are some glowing Army grunts in overly green jungle utilities. The grunts on the screen are as green as Frankenstein, like newly minted monsters standing by to be chased by a mob. They drag a limp enemy soldier out of a tunnel. The enemy soldier is a skinny teenaged boy, greased, zapped, blown away and wasted. The body looks like a muddy sack full of butchered meat. The voice-over says, "Viet Nam violence freaks kill and kill without a twinge of guilt. . . ."

Television blood is an attractive shade of red, bright, not dark. And I think: If bloodfrom that dead boy seeped down through the tubes and wires and transistors, and dripped out from the bottom of the TV screen and onto the floor, would that blood glow with an electric light as though alive? And would it still be too red? And would anybody be able to see it but me?

Sissie listens to the announcer's voice-over. As the scene cuts abruptly from body bags to a beer commercial, Sissie asks, "James, what is napalm?"

Obrey interrupts. He says, "You know any of them Army boys?"

Sissie shoos a fly off of the fried chicken.

I say, "No. I wasn't in the Army."

Obrey takes a big bite of hominy grits. "Can't understand you, boy. If you wasn't smart enough to get into a college of some kind, I bet you could have got out of going some other way." He picks up his coffee cup, pours coffee into the saucer, blows on the coffee to cool it, then slurps the coffee from the saucer. "Seems to me," Obrey says, "you got a little suckered in." He smiles, very friendly. "No offense."

I eat black-eyed peas. I eat black-eyed peas with revolutionary enthusiasm, my eyes on my plate. The Woodcutter would be proud of me.

Obrey is encouraged by my silence. He says, "Your mama and me done talked it all out. The deal is, our minds are set that the Christian thing to do is that you're sure enough welcome to stay on here for a week or two--three if you need it--give you time to sign on for a job down at the cotton mill and find a place of your own in town."

I look across the table at my mother. "Ma?"

My mother looks away, twists her hands into her apron. "Obrey's the man of the house now, James. Times have been hard for us, what with your daddy passing on and all. It's been such a sorry time for us. The government

stopped paying us for not growing peanuts. All we got left is a piece of your daddy's insurance money. Least till Obrey can find a buyer for the land.

We're bad off."

"Grow up, boy," says Obrey. "You been living high on the hog in the service, eating on our tax money, but now your free ride is over. Time you learned to stand on your own two feet and be a man."

Ma looks up. "But we all proud of you for your being a hero in the Army."

"I'm not a hero, Ma. The war is wrong." And then in terms she can understand: "It's a sin, Ma. The war in Viet Nam is a mortal sin."

My mother looks at me as though I'd just slapped her face.

Then my mother says, "Well, I wouldn't know anything about that. I only know what President Nixon says on the television. And I guess he must know what he's doing, or he wouldn't be President."

I say, "That idiot Nixon doesn't know a damned thing about Viet Nam."

Ma purses her lips. "Well, he knows a little bit more about it than you do, I guess."

I say, "Daddy would believe me. He'd know I don't lie."

My mother says, "Oh, I know you don't lie, James. But maybe you just a little mixed up, that's all. You home now. Time to forget what happened overseas. Just pretend it never happened. Put it out of your mind."

Old Ma says, "Hush up, now, Pearleen. Don't fuss at James. Let him alone. He's been gone a month of Sundays and he just got home and already you're fussing at him."

Obrey says, "The smarter boys got out of it." He sops up bean juice with a wedge of cornbread. He bites through the crunchy brown crust and into the soft yellow bread inside.

He says , "You should have got out of it."

I lean across the table and I take a good grip on Obrey's throat. I get up into his face. I say,

"You shut your mouth, you ridiculous feeb, or I will use your nose as pivot point for an amtrack movement."

Obrey says, "You're cruising for a bruising, boy." He draws a fist back for a punch.

Sissie jumps up from the table and grabs Obrey's cocked arm. "Stop! Don't you hurt James!"

Obrey slaps Sissie. Hard.

Sissie steps back, stunned, but not really hurt.

I look at my mother.

My mother says, "Obrey is your father now, James. He has every right to punish Cecilia."

Obrey says, "You listen to your mother, boy. You getting too big for your breeches. Maybe you'd like a sample of the back of my hand. That'll take the starch out of you!"

I say to Sissie, "You okay, Stringbean?"

Sissie nods, wipes tears from her eyes. On her pale cheek, distinctly outlined, is the red mark of Obrey's hand.

I say to Obrey, "If you ever touch my sister again, I'll kill you."

Obrey pulls away, says to my mother, "You see that, Pearleen? I told you when he come back he'd be like a rabid dog."

My mother says, getting up from the table, "It's the Lord's truth."

I'm thinking that I should punch Obrey's fucking heart out. Instead, I bend down and pick up the Tokarev pistol in my cowboy hat. I chamber a round. I say to Obrey, "Take this pistol.

Take the damned gun or I'll shoot your dick off."

Obrey is too scared to move.

I say, "Take the pistol, butt-hole. Do it now!"

Obrey, too scared to not move, takes the pistol from my hand.

I say, "Now hold it up to your head."

My mother starts to say something, but I say, "Shut up, Ma. Just shut the fuck up." To Obrey, I say, "Put the pistol up to your head or I'll shove it up your ass!" I step closer to Obrey, threatening him physically.

Trembling, Obrey lifts the pistol up to his head.

"Okay," I say, "now put your finger on the trigger."

Obrey hesitates.

I say, starting to lose control, "Just what is your major malfunction, numbnuts?" Getting up into Obrey's face, I scream, "DO IT! DO IT NOW!"

Obrey does it.

Cautiously, Obrey puts his finger on the trigger. He's sweating like a pig now. The gun barrel has indented a red "O" into his temple.

I say, "Are you scared? Good. Now, being in Viet Nam is different in three ways. First, the amount of time you're under the gun is not for ten or

twelve seconds, but for a year.

"Second, it's not your finger on the trigger. No, the finger on the trigger belongs to a guy who lives in stinking holes in the ground. This guy craps shrapnel and eats napalm for breakfast.

You're an invader standing on his ancestral land. You've killed his farm animals and some of his relatives. You've burned down the house his grandfather built with his own hands.

You've tortured his brother soldiers to death as a form of recreation. You've poisoned his crops. The Agent Orange in his food and water has caused his wife to give birth to monsters.

And, when he pulls down on you, when he targets you, you have just asked his baby sister if she wants to fuck. . . ."

Obrey's eyes are blinking uncontrollably. He's drooling. Suddenly I realize that Obrey has shit in his pants. He stinks with the smell of it, the smell of fear.

My mother, Old Ma, and Sissie are all crying.

I say, "Give me that pistol, you pathetic substandard non-hacker."

Obrey is frozen. I step forward and pull the gun from his hand by force.

I say, "The third thing that is different is that in Viet Nam the weapons are not on safety and are locked and cocked." I take the pistol off safety and cock it.

Obrey says, tears streaming down his cheeks, "How can you be so violent?"

I say, "That was not violence, peanut balls, that was only real life. This is violence."

I pull the trigger of the Tokarev and bam-- I fire a bullet into the kitchen floor.

Everybody jumps, stunned. The women abruptly stop crying.

My mother says, wiping her tears, "I can't believe your language. I just can't believe it."

I say, "I shoot a gun in the kitchen and you're worried about my language?" I laugh. "That's just the way people talk, Ma, when they're not on television."

My mother says, "Decent people don't use them vile words.

I say, dropping the Tokarev into my Stetson, "They don't talk that way in Heaven, Ma, but they talk that way down here."

My mother says, "Good Lord, I can't believe that. Don't tell me about it."

Obrey says, backing away from me, "You a killer now, boy. You got blood on your hands.

Your kind don't fit in. You don't belong here no more. You ain't fit to live with decent people."

I take a step toward Obrey, but my mother steps between us. "Don't you dare lay another hand on my husband!" She turns away from me. "Well, I've had just about all I can stand for one day. I'm give out." As an afterthought she adds, "There's banana pudding for dessert."

Obrey and my mother retreat down the hall. At a safe distance Obrey says to me, "I don't want loaded guns in my house. You ain't impressing nobody. I own the land you're standing on, and I want you off." Then to my mother: "That boy is hog wild and jaybird crazy."

I say, "Don't worry. I'm not staying."

Obrey sneers. "Where you gonna go? Ain't nobody gonna give no job to no crazy Veet-Nam veteran. You're up shit creek without a paddle, boy."

I say, "Hey, I got me a job in Istanbul polishing brass-topped buildings, if that's all right with you, and even if it's not all right with you, shit-for-brains. Now go away. Leave me. Change your pants."

As Obrey and my mother hunker down in their bedroom I can hear my mother saying,

"Where's that Istanbul?" and, "I swear, I prayed that the Army would make a man out of him.

I prayed, Obrey. I prayed to the Lord."

Old Ma gets up from the table, comes over and hugs me.

I say, "I've missed you, Old Ma. Been doing any fishing?"

Old Ma says, "No, James, I don't get around too much after I broke my hip. I never thought I'd be old, but look at me now." She pats me on the back, but her hand is frail and weak. Old Ma has always been old, but she never seemed old, until now. The bounce has gone out of her. "I'm just an old broad, but I'm still sharp upstairs. You a good boy, James. Your daddy was always proud to bust of you."

I say, "Thank you, Old Ma."

Old Ma whispers to me, "He sure knows how to lap up the joy juice. He's just eat up with jealousy, that Beasley. Don't blame your mama."

Old Ma, looking tired, her face soft but solid, like an old cameo, goes off to bed.

Sissie and I eat banana pudding. Sissie picks through the creamy yellow pudding and eats vanilla wafers and round chips of banana until she looks sick.

I go outside and chop firewood until sundown, until night comes, night, the great black dragon.

When I come in from chopping firewood I go to Sissie's room and I wake her up. She follows me to my room.

I dig into my AWOL bag and pull out a small brown paper sack. I make a shush gesture, putting a forefinger to my lips, and I give the paper sack to Sissie.

Sissie opens the sack and peeks inside. Her mouth falls open. She reaches in and pulls out a few of the crisp new one-hundred-dollar bills. "James, I'll bet there's a million dollars in there!"

I say, "Not quite. It's three thousand dollars. From my back pay for when I was a P.O.W. It's yours now."

Sissie says, "But don't you need it?"

I say, "I've kept a couple of thousand. That's all I'm going to need."

Sissie thinks I'm playing a joke. "But this is your money, James. You earned it. "

I laugh. "Well, not actually." To her puzzled look, I say, "I wasn't a very good prisoner."

Sissie doesn't understand. She looks at the bills. "But why you giving it to me? What can I buy?"

I take her hand between my two hands and I hold up the three hands between us. "Listen, Stringbean, I'm going to have to go back into the service. I'll probably be shipped back overseas. Maybe for a long time. I wish I could take you with me, but I can't. In a couple of years you'll be sixteen and they can't put the law on you. When you're sixteen, you take this money and you buy yourself a bus ticket to Arizona. They've still got room to breathe out there. Get yourself a job. You're a smart girl. You got a good head on your shoulders. You'll be okay. I got confidence in you."

Sissie nods, not understanding.

"Now you take this money and hide it. Don't tell anybody you got it. Okay? Not anybody. I want you to promise."

Sissie thinks about it, then says, "I promise, James. Cross my heart and hope to die."

I say, "Wrap it up in wax paper and stick it in a Mason jar and bury it under the house. Okay?

"

Sissie nods, not understanding. "Okay, you ol' poop-head. I promise it'll just be our secret."

She hugs me good-night. "Sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite. I'll take real good care of your money for you, big brother, until you come back home."

Sissie goes to her room and I flop down on my back on my bed, still wearing the green of a cold-hearted Marine. I stare at the ceiling. It's hard to sleep. There's no firing in the distance.

No dying sick men screaming in the dark. It's too quiet.

When I do sleep I have a nightmare about a napalmed tiger. The napalmed tiger has red, white, and blue stripes. It lopes across my father's fields, slapping watermelons off the vines with powerful claws, splattering the rich earth with black seeds and wet chunks of juicy red meat.

In the morning I feel a painful poking in my ribs. I open my eyes. At first I think I'm having a nightmare and that the old Broom-Maker of the village of Hoa Binh had come to exact her revenge. But it's only my mother, waking me. My mother is holding a broom by the yellow bristles and is poking me in the ribs with the tip of the long handle, careful to keep her distance.

I say, "Ma, that hurts. I'm awake now."

My mother says, "Breakfast is on the table, James. I took your Army clothes out of that little bag and washed them for you. I took them pictures."

I say, "What pictures?"

"They was in your pockets. Them that showed dead people in the war."

The pictures I took from Commander Bryant, the Navy shrink. I say, "Where are they?"

My mother says, "I burned them."

I laugh. "I don't need photographs, Ma. I got pictures of Viet Nam tattooed all over my body.

What are you going to do, burn me too?"

She does not reply.

Breakfast. There is gunpowder in my cereal bowl. Civilian gunpowder. Pure and white.

Obrey is not at breakfast. Ma says, "Obrey's sleeping in today. His back has been acting up."

Old Ma says, "Daughter, that man was born tired and he's still resting. Or maybe he's still wore out from his little hissy-fit."

I say, lying, "I'll be leaving tonight. Maybe get a job up North. Or find a place where they got rich farmland. Maybe get a piece of land up North somewhere. Do a little farming."

My mother is deaf and dumb to any unpleasant reality and hears only what she wants to hear; she's pretty much got that down to an art form. But now my mother and I are communicating again because now I am telling her nothing but lies.

Ma, if I dared to speak the truth to you, I'd have to say that I joined the Marines to get away from you and people like you.

In Birmingham I will catch a plane back to Los Angeles. In Los Angeles I'll take a flight to Viet Nam. I'll get a visa by using my old Combat Correspondent I.D. card; I'll say that now I'm a freelance reporter, looking for a story.

From Da Nang I'll thumb a ride on a medevac chopper going toward the DMZ. I'll buy a bicycle. I'll ride the bicycle to the village of Hoa Binh.

I should be there in time for spring planting. Time to plow the paddies and plant the tender rice shoots. Maybe I'll learn to hear the rice grow, after all.

The only time I ever felt like I was being what an American should be and doing what an American should be doing was when I was a prisoner of the Viet Cong. I could be real there.

I could be myself. Even when I was playing a role there I was myself. Here I'm expected to play a role, but I don't know who I'm supposed to be. People who have nothing to lose have nothing to live for. I'd rather be killed in a war than be bored to death an inch at a time. In the village of Hoa Binh I was free. I was not a helpless pawn. I had a future. I had friends who could be trusted. War is real and men need reality like they need air and food.

When I was a fighter in the Viet Cong, I was real. When I was a fighter in the Viet Cong, life was not a talk show.

Sitting across from me at the breakfast table, my mother does not know what to say in response to my announcement that I'm leaving and going up North to farm. So she simply ignores it and tries to sound cheerful. "Well, tonight's Obrey's bowling night. Maybe we could give you a ride to the Greyhound station. Save you walking."

I swab up some gravy with a piece of biscuit. "Thank you, Ma. I'll be home on about sundown."

To the gloomy silence around the breakfast table, I say, "Cheer up." I smile and say, "Toi chong chien trach." Fingering a braided string inside my shirt, I hold on to the white jade Buddha given to me by Comrade-General Tiger Eye, Commander of the Western Region.

When Ma, Old Ma, and Stringbean look at me, confused, I translate: "Toi chong chien trach.

It means, 'I'm going home.'"

I walk miles across our neighbor's fields to the Rock Creek Cemetery.

The graves in the cemetery have been covered with special sand that is as white as sugar. On each low mound of earth are green wire stands holding plastic flowers mounted on Styrofoam blocks of pink or white. Once a year, on Decoration Day, the families of the dead come together and clean off the graves of their ancestors, and remember all of the generations that came before, just as they do on TET in Viet Nam.

In the Davis section of the cemetery lie about fifty of our people, going back to 1816. The oldest marker is for William Oliver Davis. The marker is a thin slab of orange fieldstone, weathered, the name and the date almost unreadable.

Near my father's grave is the impressive granite marker put up by the Daughters of the Confederacy back in the 1930s, when Solomon Davis was buried in his Confederate uniform, seventy years after the end of the War for Southern Independence. Grandpa Davis was a scout for Bedford Forrest and was wounded at the battle of Shiloh. He died in the middle of the jazz Age with a grapeshot the size of an iron golf ball still inside his chest.

My father's grave is freshly dug, not yet covered with white sand, but still the plain rich brown of turned soil, the color of soil in a freshly plowed field.

I touch the gray limestone block that says: PLEASANT CURTIS DAVIS.

My first memories of my father are of me bouncing beside him, a boy sitting on the hard seat of our green wagon. The wagon was drawn by a sturdy and indestructible one-eyed mule we called Roosevelt. The wagon bed was loaded high with ripe sun-warmed watermelons.

We'd drive down to the county highway and park by the road. To people in the cars that whizzed down the highway we sold watermelons, big, dark green, and round, for a quarter each, while Roosevelt grazed on wild flowers by the side of the road.

My job was to make change out of a cigar box while my father helped our customers pick a good melon, ripe but not too ripe. He'd thump the melons hard with his finger until he found one that sounded just ripe enough.

At the end of the day my father would count up the cash and pay me my wages. My father liked to say, "If you've got a dollar you didn't earn, you won't have fun when you spend it."

My father never had any money, but his weathered face had that dignified and undefeated strength that comes from keeping faith with the land. He'd say, laughing, each morning when he came to wake me up at the crack of dawn, "Farming puts iron into your blood!"

One day some pogue book-farmers come down from up North, college kids working for the Yankee law. Wanted our neighbors, mostly sharecroppers, to spray bug poison over the soil.

My father refused, but some of our neighbors went on ahead. They sprayed poison out of airplanes and it spread onto our land. The poison ended up killing all the earthworms that help to keep the soil arable. We lost the crop.

Next season my father rolled his John Deere tractor and broke his hip. Our friends and kinfolk pitched in to help, and we made a crop that year.

Hospital bills put us so far in the hole that a rich man from Decatur offered to buy us out.

The rich man said we could stay on and work the land for him on shares. The rich man was not a farmer; he was a banker who liked to buy land. The banker joked, "Land is the one thing you can't make more of."

The only way my father could hold on to the farm was to take a job with a strip-mining outfit in Jasper. He hated his job because of how strip-mining

ruins the land. One night after supper I asked him how he liked his new job. He said, "Son, I done plowed up a snake."

Back in the big double-U-two, when Americans were all ten feet tall and named Mac, my father was a cook in the Navy. At battle stations he was an ack-ack gunner. Somewhere off Okinawa he shot down a kamikaze plane that was diving into an aircraft carrier. The plane exploded so close that a piece of wingtip hit my father in the neck. My mother says that my father looked into the Japanese pilot's face moments before the plane burst into a red ball of fire.

Standing over my father's grave, one war older, I think: In every other way, you never let me down. You were always as dependable as a tractor. But you never told me about war, and I don't know why. You never talked about your war. Your brothers, my uncles, who fought the Nazis in Europe, never talked about the war. All of you let me go off and stick my face into a meat grinder, when you all knew it was going to be a meat grinder. I went to Viet Nam a military virgin, too dumb to do anything but draw fire. And you cheered me and were proud of me and you wished me good luck, but you never gave me one word of warning. I didn't want to go; I did it for you.

Touching my father's cold gray granite tombstone one last time, I know that I've got no choice but to secure this detail and move out toward the future. Time measured in blood never ends.

Blood never dries. Facts are not pretty. By some black magic a stray Viet Cong bullet ricocheted around the planet and blasted open an artery inside my father's head.

My last day on the farm, all of the hogs had died of cholera and my father and I spent the day burning them.

My father is dead now, and time is moving away from him. Meanwhile I have plowed up a few snakes of my own, the ground is full of snakes; that's my op and I'll walk it.

But, touching the tombstone, I wonder if my father knows that I'm here, and if he knows, is he still proud of me? I'm not even twenty-one years old yet and already I've killed more men than Billy the Kid.

"Life," I say before I go, "that's something I learned off of you."

On about sundown, when the crickets start to sing, I walk back to the house, tired from hiking through the woods all day.

Still in uniform, I put on my dirty Stetson. I pick up my AWOL bag.

Obrey gives me a ride to the bus station in a black Ford pickup truck. The truck has extra wide tires and chrome wheel rims.

As we drive away from the house I was born in I do not look back. I'm afraid. I'm afraid that artillery shells will be going in, blasting the ancient wood apart. I'm afraid that Phantom fighter-bombers will be booming in low over the treeline, strafing the banty hen in the yard with automatic cannon fire and laying shiny canisters of napalm across Old Ma's vegetable garden, burning the scarecrow and the squash.

I was born in Viet Nam, a long time ago. My hometown is strange to me now, like a foreign country. It's too late for Vanessa and me to settle down in a little bunker somewhere, cook Crations, clean our M-16s, and raise recruits.

If I look back, even for a moment, the old house will be gone, swallowed up by a whirlwind of red fire and smoke.

I look forward, straight ahead. As my father said to me the day I left the farm to go to Viet Nam: "The step is hard that tears away the roots."

The Phantom Blooper is going home.

I ride in the open truck bed, with Sissie on one side and Obrey's purple bowling bag on the other. Sissie and I are scrunched in with a dozen cardboard boxes full of empty beer cans that